

NEITHER ALLOWED TO GET OLD, NOR ALLOWED TO STAY YOUNG:  
URBAN KAZAKHSTANI AGED WOMEN NEGOTIATE AGEING

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction .....	8
Chapter 2. Methodology and Literature review .....	13
2.1 Research design and methods .....	13
2.2 Sampling and recruitment procedures .....	14
2.3 Data analysis .....	16
2.4 Research ethic .....	17
2.5 Researcher’s position .....	18
2.6 Literature review .....	20
Chapter 3. “Not Allowed to Get Old, Not Allowed to Stay Young”: Aged Women Negotiate Ageing, Old Age, and Femininity .....	30
3.1 “Life is over”: Discourses of ageism .....	31
3.2 “Never give up!” Anti-ageing discourses .....	36
3.3 Negotiating ageing as a life stage: Opportunities and limits .....	42
Chapter 4. Caregiving: Negotiating Ageing, Gender Roles, Society and Culture .....	49
4.1 Caregiving is a gendered cultural expectation .....	51
4.2 Caregiving as a social norm .....	57
4.3 Caregiving as anti-ageing.....	70
Chapter 5. Discussion of analyzed data .....	75
Conclusion .....	83
Bibliography .....	85
Appendices.....	89
Ethics protocol for the study .....	89
The example of the mind map used for data interpretation .....	92

## Abstract

Critical literature on ageing and old age points to the pervasiveness of ageism, whereas aged people do not celebrate high social status in modern industrial capitalist societies. At the same time, anti-ageing discourses give the agency as well as place the responsibility to “fight” with ageing and old age on the aged people themselves. While above mentioned dictates are more or less global and can be applied to many modern societies, Kazakhstani societal and cultural patterns simultaneously dictate its own expectations regarding the limits, opportunities, and rights of aged people. Sociocultural expectations also greatly depend on gender.

Building on the discourse analysis of qualitative interviews with Kazakhstani aged women (59-69 years old) this study points to multiple, complex, and contradictory discourses around old age, ageing, and gender permeating and shaping social lives of aged women in today Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, this study also shows that aged women are not passive recipients of societal discourses about gender and ageing. Instead, they are active participants in discourse production. By talking about caregiving practices that constitute a significant part of their lives and ageing experience, they exploit contradictory societal discourses regarding old age and ageing, and gender roles. This and other self-representation discursive strategies allow them to maintain a sense of control, dignity, self-worth, continuity in their lives, and connectedness to others.

*Keywords:* ageing, aged women, elderly, old, Kazakhstan, social ageing, gender, ageism

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

The worldwide increase of the life span affects the social construction of the old age and being old as well. According to the official statistics, women's longevity in Kazakhstan is about 75 years old, whereas men's life expectancy is about 67.<sup>1</sup> One of the research participants (63 years old) provocatively claimed that she is "not allowed to get old" because she continues to be very important for her family and, therefore, society. Her way to deal with oldness was to deny it and she also told me about the efforts she put to keep it away for as much as possible. On the other hand, the same woman repeatedly acknowledged that she was not young anymore and that ageing is inevitable and should be accepted. Her discursive strategy offers an insight into how aged women in Kazakhstan experience ageing, construct ageing, and negotiate age and gender identities as ageing women.

First, this study points to multiple, complex, and contradictory discourses around old age, ageing, and gender permeating and shaping social lives of aged women in today Kazakhstan. Second, this study reveals fluid and shifting self-representation discursive strategies that aged women employ to negotiate their identities and roles. Next, I show how aged women use caregiving discourses as a strategy to maintain their identities, relations with their families and standing in the society as well as continuity in their lives after retirement and outside of formal employment. At the same time, this analysis demonstrates how caregiving discourses that aged women produce also re-produce cultural norms that ensure their conformity with gender roles and unequal caregiving responsibilities at a later stage in women's lives. This study also shows that aged women are not passive recipients of societal discourses about gender and ageing. Instead, they are active participants in the discourse production. By applying a range of strategies to navigate and exploit contradictory societal discourses regarding old age and ageing, women find a way of constructing fluid age identity

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<sup>1</sup> See the country data by World Health Organization  
[https://www.who.int/gho/countries/kaz/country\\_profiles/en/](https://www.who.int/gho/countries/kaz/country_profiles/en/)

as well as gender that allow them to maintain a sense of control, dignity, self-worth, continuity in their lives, and connectedness to others.

Similarly to much of the theoretical body of literature, this study points to the pervasiveness of ageism in society. Research participants live in an ageist society that is permeated with the stereotypes about being old. Ageing is constructed as a problem that is based on the assumption “that there is a gap between aged and others” (Hazan 1994, p.18). The research participants do not oppose ageism; rather they negotiate ageing and old age by employing various discursive strategies, including ageist discourses to define their own ageing in society. For example, the research participant mentioned in the beginning of the thesis denied oldness in her self-representation by means of emphasizing her importance and contribution to the family needs. Likewise, the research participants stressed the importance of continuity to be active, useful, and helpful in order to distinguish themselves from those who are old and are believed to be a burden. In contrast to the ideas of inevitability of old age, this strategy is a reproduction of anti-ageing discourses that emphasize one’s agency and responsibility to postpone oldness with its assumed consequences. Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin (2001) view the dictate of staying active that constitutes in the ideas of successful, productive, positive ageing as ageist as well because it assumes the cult of youthfulness in Western societies. People encouraged to stay young physically, mentally, to retain a lifestyle that younger people have as much as possible. The authors argue that such concepts “devalue the old in relation to the middle aged” (p. 182) when people are being imposed to keep up with younger ones, even though some do not want or cannot do so. Similarly, some women in this study admitted that they “fail” to fulfill anti-ageing practices regularly because of the resource constrains, but emphasized the importance of these practices in general. Yet, even though Kazakhstani aged women are influenced by the dictate of anti-ageing from media, Internet, younger relatives, and etc., sociocultural expectations

around old age in Kazakhstan that continue to differ considerably from Western societies is crucial in shaping their construction of ageing and old age as well. The research participants negatively evaluate any attempts to go beyond the age limits imposed by sociocultural discourse in terms of appropriate behaviour, style, and way of life for women of their life-stage.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on caregiving performed by aged women toward others. Most of the literature related to caregiving and aged people is focused on the latter as on the recipients of care, such as research on “sandwich generation” or motivations and reasons for intergenerational support by adult children such as “repayment” of what parents have invested in them (Göransson, 2013). However, for the research participants in this study caregiving was the most often raised theme in terms of their agency as caretakers. Surely, this study does not include disabled research participants who cannot contribute due to the health limits, but even the oldest study participants (67-69 years old) and those who had considerable health issues such as surgically removed thyroid or an increase in insulin production stressed their activeness and importance as caregivers.

By engaging in discourses on ageing and old age that are complex, contradictory, and constructed contextually, women retain a sense of control over self-representation and their roles in family and society. This thesis is aimed to disentangle the complexity of meanings of ageing for women in Kazakhstan. While this analysis offers an insight into Kazakhstani women’s ageing experiences, it also seeks to deconstruct various aspects of social ageing such as body image, femininity, caregiving, and grandmothering.

The research questions of the thesis are the following:

1. How do aged women in Kazakhstan experience ageing and construct ageing?
2. How do aged women in Kazakhstan relate to the dominant societal discourses about old age and gender?

3. What discursive strategies do aged women employ to negotiate ageing and gender roles and identities as aged women?

It is important to explain and justify the use of terms in this study. Although some scholars suggest that there is no need to avoid negative connotations of the word “old” (Calasanti & Slevin 2001), I use the term “aged” for the participants and “ageing” for the process because I believe these are more neutral words with fewer negative connotations in comparison to the words “old”, “older”, “elderly” or “seniors”. Though there is no a single criteria to define when the old age begins, and the definition depends on a perspective on the ‘object’ (Hazan 1994), retirement proved to be useful in extensive research on ageing because typically it signifies a major transformation in one’s life. For this study, the retirement is also a helpful benchmark as the majority of women of working age in Kazakhstan are actively involved in the labour market<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, I conducted interviews with study participants in Russian language. To mitigate negative connotations to old age in Russian, I referred to them as “the women of the retirement age” (*zhenshiny pensionnogo vozrasta*), and asked questions about elderly people (*pozhiye lyudi*) not using word “old” (as *staryi, staraya*) during the interview. The terms and language I used with the participants are described in further detail below in the methodology chapter of the thesis.

The thesis is organized in five chapters. After the introduction, the study methodology and literature review are presented in Chapter 2. I describe and justify the use of qualitative research design for this study, methods of data collection, sampling and recruiting procedures, and data analysis procedures. I review and find the gaps that this study is aimed to fill in the theoretical literature regarding social ageing and negotiation of age identification as well as the ethnographies that address the experience of ageing for women in different sociocultural

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<sup>2</sup> According to the data of the Statistics Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in 2018 out of 8.5 million of employed people in Kazakhstan 4.1 million were women  
[http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav\\_externalId/homeNumbersLabor?\\_afLoop=9262953653124456#%40%3F\\_afRLoop%3D9262953653124456%26\\_adf.ctrl-state%3Dn94gtstez\\_63](http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersLabor?_afLoop=9262953653124456#%40%3F_afRLoop%3D9262953653124456%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dn94gtstez_63)

contexts. Then, the analysis of interview data will be discussed, the main result being the fluid identities of aged women who negotiate ageing and old age in different contexts of speaking in Chapter 3. In the following chapter, Chapter 4, the precise attention will be given to the core and complex theme of caregiving in the research participants' accounts. I argue that being a caregiver and talking about it is a specific for Kazakhstani aged women way of dealing with multiple normative discourses regarding ageing. Chapter 5 contains the discussion of the main argument of the thesis and suggestions for future research. In addition, Appendix A includes the Research Ethic Protocol.

## **Chapter 2. Methodology and Literature Review**

### **Research design and methods**

To address the ageing experience of women in greater depth, I take the exploratory qualitative research approach. Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2013) describe qualitative research and its methods as "...a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" by means of studying "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". (p.3) Therefore, qualitative research goes hand in hand with the aim of this study and is useful to interpret the social "world" of women as they age. Moreover, it is crucial for my study to hear the voices of the participants, to minimize assumptions about their experiences as much as possible, and to give them an opportunity to raise the topics that are salient for them.

While much of research on the elderly employs quantitative research designs such as exploratory surveys, I believe that it is important to start by exploring the lived experiences and perspective of the aged in order to avoid leading questions and imposing stereotypes about ageing on participants from the perspective of younger researchers or policy-makers whose primary goal is to "solve" the "problem" of ageing. For example, I have identified many stereotypes regarding the participants that I brought with me to the field and have been deconstructing them throughout the study by engaging in self- reflection on the research process, memo-writing, and reading the scholarly literature.

The data sources include ten semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews with aged women. Each interview was approximately one and a half hour-long, and took a form of ordinary, casual conversations about participants' lives, views, experiences, families, etc.

## Sampling and recruitment procedures

First, I consider the retirement as an eligibility criteria benchmark for this study. However, so as to narrow down the still very heterogeneous sample population for this research project I am focusing on recently retired women - from 1 to 10 years of retirement - or women of the same age - 59-69 years old, with regard to the official age of retirement for women in the Republic of Kazakhstan at the time of conducting the research. Second, I address only certain cases of urban women living in northern and central parts of Kazakhstan, and I believe they might differ considerably from women living in rural areas or in more traditional southern or western regions. Therefore, in order to meet the conditions described above I used purposive sampling where the main criteria included the following: gender - female participants; age - 59-69; ethnicity - people of different ethnicities; and place of residence in one of the two Kazakhstani cities, namely, Astana and Karaganda. I chose Astana as the capital with quite a diverse population because most people migrated from different corners of Kazakhstan, and Karaganda as a case of a provincial city. Family and work status were not the used as selection criteria.

As I recruited and talked with the participants in Russian and there is no adequate equivalent for the neutral word “aged” in the language I still tried to be sensitive to the language I used with the participants. Because of strong cultural norms in Kazakhstan, it is considered impolite to ask a woman about her age or especially refer to her as “old” or “elderly”. So, during the recruitment, I presented my study as focused on life and experience of women of the age of retirement (*zhenshchiny pensionnogo vozrasta*). This allowed me to approach people and inform about my research goals in a polite way. Also, with a view to eliciting the self-representations and meanings that the participants bring to the agedness during the interview, I pointed: “There is such a phrase as “an elderly person”; do you

consider yourself as elderly?" (*Est' takaya fraza – pozhiloy chelovek, schitaete li Vy sebya pozhiloy?*).

In terms of the recruitment strategies, I recruited 8 out of 10 participants through a snowballing strategy and personal connections, one woman was my neighbour in Astana, and I conducted one more interview in a taxi on the way to Karaganda with a female stranger, who was friendly and talkative. I used a snowballing sampling because my initial plans to recruit participants were unsuccessful. For example, it was not feasible to recruit participants while approaching people in the streets or in my neighbourhood, in their apartments or at the workplace. The initial plan included, for instance, involving women who sell their agricultural products. It is turned out that women of the relevant age approached in the streets were suspicious and busy to an extent that I did not expect (which points out to my stereotypes about aged women being talkative and having a lot of free time). First, people in Kazakhstan appear not to trust other people they do not know anything about. Second, they were in a hurry and had no time to listen to me describing the topic and providing the general information about the research and just ignored me. Perhaps, they might have thought that I wanted to advertise or sell something. Moreover, the so-called centres for elderly people (*dosugovyi tsestr dlya pozhilykh lyudei*) I contacted were substantially different from what I imagined. My expectation that these are places where aged people spent a lot of time where it would be possible to conduct focus groups and observations as additional data gathering methods, apart from individual interviews. However, these turned out to be morning dance and fitness classes for aged people where a few people came, exercised and went back.

Therefore, as the result of a snowballing recruitment strategy, most of the study participants are well educated (7 have higher education and 3 have a secondary vocational education). In terms of the economic situation, none of the participants self-assessed themselves as poor, whereas one of the participants defined her status as well-to-do. I

deliberately chose not to focus only on one particular ethnicity, so I have five participants who are ethnic Kazakhs and five participants of other ethnicities. However, all of them were born on the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan and/or have spent the most of their lives there (Table 1.).

**Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants**

<i>Number</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Ethnic identity</i>	<i>Place of residence</i>	<i>Education / former occupation</i>	<i>Status</i>
1	59	Raushan <sup>3</sup>	Kazakh	Astana	secondary vocational education/seamstress	Retired (1 year ago)
2	69	Lidiya	Ukrainian	Karaganda	secondary vocational education/accountant	Retired (5 years ago)
3	67	Anna	Ukrainian	Karaganda	higher / chemist	Retired (9 years ago)
4	61	Gul'nur	Kazakh	Karaganda	higher / school teacher	Retired (3 years ago)
5	65	Aigul'	Kazakh	Astana	higher / doctor	Retired (>7 years ago)
6	64	Lena	Russian	Astana	higher / school teacher	Retired (5 years ago)
7	63	Nataliya	Russian	Karaganda	higher / Teaching Professor at a University	Works in administration in a university
8	66	Nadezhda	Russian	Astana	secondary vocational education/accountant	Part-time working, cleaning lady
9	63	Diana	Kazakh	Astana	higher / psychologist	Retired (3 years ago)
10	67	Zhanar	Kazakh	Astana-Karaganda	higher / school teacher	Retired (>7 years ago)

Most of the research participants were educated in the Soviet period and worked as skilled professionals before the dissolution of the USSR and after the Republic of Kazakhstan got its independence. Three out of ten women retired at the official age of retirement which is 58 years old. Others continued to work for some time because of their own desire or necessity to have salary and pension at the same time, due to their desire to contribute, or help “new generation” of workers, or because of the request of the employers; one woman found a part-

<sup>3</sup> All names used in the thesis are pseudonyms.

time job as a cleaning lady and claimed that this is not for money but for the purpose of staying active. In terms of their marital status, four women have husbands, three women are widowed, and three women are divorced and never remarried. All women except one have children and grandchildren; only three women who have children live separately from them, others live together and help their families every day. The research participants who live with children and grandchildren as a coincidence have only daughters, while only Nadezhda's son live separately and daughter live with her. Seven of out ten are actively involved in caregiving practices for their grandchildren, while other two who have grandchildren live far away from them and do not have this opportunity.

In terms of the health and appearance, the research participants are not always consistent with what they say and what they do, because it seems that it is more important to produce the discourse of ideal appearance and positive ageing than to live according to its dictates. Six research participants emphasized the importance of staying physically active and claimed that they at least try to exercise or to walk in the fresh air every day, whereas one does yoga, and one goes to fitness. Other four also acknowledge the importance of physical activities but admit that they do not have time for this or are lazy. Eight participants stressed the importance of maintenance of femininity, and everyday beauty by means of makeup, hair dying, nice clothes, cosmetologist service, beauty salons, anti-age products, and constant "fight" with weight. However, they admit that they can often neglect some of these "rules" because of the lack of time, energy, money, and importance of other things such as care for their families. Also, only Aigul' has the economic situation that allows her to use the service of beauty salon regularly.

### **Data analysis**

I used open and selective coding procedures as it is the way of defining "what is happening in the data" (Charmaz 2006, p.113). Therefore, data analysis procedures began

with transcribing and organizing the audio records of the interviews. Second, I read and re-read transcripts carefully to familiarize myself with data, and reflected its overall meaning: what answers participants give related to the research questions and how they express it. Also, I took notes and memos throughout the research process. Third, the data were sorted by coding procedures that included open coding (labelling sentence by sentence), and selective coding identify themes and find interactions among the themes. Then, I create a data matrix – a data table in Excel with themes, categories and quotes in order to make accessing the parts of the data easier, so as to filter the table by themes, codes or participants. Identification by line and page number helped me find the needed excerpts in the context of original transcripts. Next, I created a mind map with major themes in order to visualise them and identify relationships among them. The mind map is presented in the Appendix B. This step was necessary because the data showed that the themes raised by the participants on their ageing were interconnected with each other and could not be presented using a linear logic or as merely relations of cause and effect. The use of different symbols (e.g. red heart for caregiving) and colors helped me to see a bigger picture. Finally, I wrote up my interpretation of the themes and identified patterns in order to construct a theory and to place my research findings within the existing literature.

### **Research ethics**

In order to protect the privacy of research participants, all the interviews were treated as confidential information, and the names of participants were replaced with pseudonyms. The risks for participants were assessed as minimal because of the nature of interview questions. However, it is important to note that I understand that the ageing as well as family, and recollections of the past might be sensitive and even intimate topics for some individuals. Discussing questions related to the ageing of body, family relations, and attitudes of other people toward the interviewee may have posed emotional risks and required trust-building in

relations. Thus, I made an effort as a researcher/interviewer to be sensitive to avoid such risks. However, properly harnessed, it was essentially an interesting discussion for both sides because usually, participants wanted to talk and be heard about their lives and issues. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. Remarkably, the participants were mostly not interested in the consent form and even asked to skip that part and proceed to the interview. I present the ethical considerations in greater detail in the ethics protocol in the Appendix A.

### **Researcher's position**

I am a young female researcher, so mostly the women were free to talk with me on even sensitive topics. Also the research participants could construct the identities of experienced women that can give advice to me regarding my life, marriage, health. In addition, since my childhood, I have had a close relationship with my grandparents. My grandmother is a 78-year-old Kazakh woman who has been working all her life as a doctor, and is now the caregiver for the family: her husband (my grandfather), her daughter (my mother) and me. At the same time, since she had several surgeries and cannot stay so active as she used to be, we also help her with household chores. Thus, I could be biased as throughout my life I witnessed the image of an aged woman who has devoted all her time for family and does not have many other interests.

Likewise, my Kazakh ethnic identity might affect my interviews with individuals who share or do not share that identity. Yet, it is important to note that my Russian is fluent because I studied in Russian school and university, so I assume that all the research participants were comfortable talking to me. I could also assume that Kazakhs are allegedly more family-oriented than others but I tried to be unbiased as much as possible during the interviews. Surely, ten research participants were insufficient to contest or support this

assumption because some of the Russian and Ukrainian participants were very family-oriented as well as Kazakh.

Furthermore, reading the research literature on aged women made me aware of a variety of different experiences among this group of the population, helping me to take a step back and assess aged women critically, without making assumptions about what their life should look like. In addition, to reduce my biases, I kept making memos in the diary about my feelings, thoughts and reactions as a reflection on my interaction with the participants. Furthermore, as I already mentioned, I assume that there is a strong ageism in society, which means that there is inequality between the aged and the non-aged. However, I treat this as the matter of fact, and as an interesting phenomenon which I am not in charge of influencing or changing.

So, I assume that I am a key instrument in the study analysis because it is my view, response and interpretation of the issues that are under scrutiny. The results of the study are by no means statistically representative of the population of aged women in Kazakhstan because of the nature of qualitative research, but are suggestive of the trajectories that urban women go through as they age in Kazakhstan. It is, however, impossible to capture or have direct access to the experience of other people. In other words, the researcher is obliged to interpret the self-representations and self-perceptions of the lived experience. Although the individuals who participated in the study are significantly different, numerous common patterns that are shaped by society have been identified. I provide reliability and validity; or it is better to claim about dependability and credibility in qualitative research, with the help of self-reflection and strategies such as scholarly adviser and peer reviews, memo-writing, member checks and constant comparison.

## **Literature review**

The body of scholarly literature that studies ageing and old age primarily originates from the Western context where individualism and cult of youthfulness are cultural values that contribute to the stigmatisation of old age. Therefore, theories and ethnographies coined in the West are often accused in cross-cultural blindness. However, while this thesis is interested in women who are ageing in Kazakhstan, I agree with this statement only partially. On the one hand, the socio-cultural environment that shapes social ageing in Kazakhstan is different from the Western one. For example, it is believed that traditional Kazakh culture places a great emphasis on respect for the elders. Moreover, the Soviet past further contributes to the collectivist “spirit” of society where interconnectedness and support were significant for all segments of society. On the other hand, Kazakhstani society is changing to a “modern” one where aged people are far from being highly valued. Thus, the achievements of Western scholars on ageing are useful for this literature review as well as the examples of cross-cultural studies.

Ageing is physical and social changes over one’s lifespan according to which certain classification and expectations are created, but their meanings are by no means fixed (Vincent, 2007). Identification based on age is not something people have, rather as any other identities, it is constructed, performed, negotiated in the course of socially conditioned semiotic work (Blommaert, 2005). Justine Coupland (2009) addressed the unstable age-identity as a process of categorisation which is achieved in practical activities of talk and highly depends on a context. For example, “being 50” is complex because it depends on a context of negotiation whether utterance has some immediate purpose or is expressed as a part of an extended course of talk (Coupland, 2000). However, the authors do not specify what powers can influence the negotiation of age-identity within society and across the world.

Many scholars admitted that ageing in society is a gendered phenomenon, as well as the gender has age. Levy (1988) pointed out the inevitability of the intersection of sex and

age as two bio-social identities that are used in social stratification and categorization, where both cannot be understood without each other. There is also the significant contribution of critical gerontologists such as Calasanti and Slevin (2001), who use “gender lens” that stresses the importance of intersectionality of gender with age, as well as other social identities, which create relations of power (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation). The scholars consider the intersection of these identities and claim that it might contribute to as well as might not contribute to but provide a range of coping strategies with the stigmatisation of old people. Intersectionality refers to the idea that intersection of identities, which contribute to power relations, is not merely a sum of disadvantageous experiences that inevitably lead to the worst outcomes, rather it is a way to “qualitatively different experiences” (Calasanti & Slevin 2001, p.38) due to all people’s coping strategies and resistance.

As people live in society rather than in isolation, we acquire shared attitudes and hidden assumptions toward processes and phenomena around us based on dominant discourses. In turn, people adopt, confirm and reinforce the images and stereotypes about themselves from internalized life-long experience (Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902/1983). The understanding of this vicious circle is particularly useful when considering strong social confusion about old age and the natural ageing of a physical body. For example, studies confirmed that negative stereotypes about old people are part of early socialization (DePallo et al., 1995; Isaacs & Bearison, 1986). Old women usually are portrayed as frail, socially not important, not central, with the negative psychological meaning (lonely, mentally unstable, etc.) and with stereotypical appearance, dressing, and a limited set of possible activities in children’s literature (Henneberg, 2010; Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013), as well as visual representations found in the Internet (Caldas-Coulthard & Moon, 2016). Moreover, the media have a strong impact on old people’s self-perception because they might consume its products a lot (Vasil & Wass, 1993).

The distorted representations of old people are the expression of ageism. Haim Hazan (1994) who synthesized theory and ethnography on old age in his book, asserts that ageing is primarily constructed as a problem based on the ageist assumption that “there is a gap between aged” and the rest non-aged people (p.18). According to the author, ageist society considers aged people as *others*, while the extent of dehumanization and disengagement with age depends on the socio-cultural context. For example, it can be high social integration and retained multiple identities of an old person as it was in some agricultural and preliterate societies. Or old people can be fully disengaged from society whether it is done by means of old-age “homes” or physical elimination; and they can be dehumanised by reducing of their multiple identities to only one - “old”. Usually, aged people do not celebrate high social status in modern industrial capitalist societies because knowledge, resources, and power are no longer earned through the long-lived experience only (Cowgill & Holmes, 1972). In this sense, Kazakhstan is not an exception as it is globalized, modernized, an industrialized society with a capitalist system, yet the expression of respect for older people is qualitatively different from other societies.

Also, ageism as a mere attitude that exists in social structures is still a broad concept. Yet, thanks to the special attention of linguists to the ways in which people use language to negotiate their identities, understanding of an ageism switched to more concrete concept of *discourses of ageism* as “the forms of talk and ways of meaning that negotiate rights, obligations and opportunities in the context of an attribution of ageist practice” (Coupland, 1997, p. 36). This means that ageist stereotypes are achieved by people in their interactions. Indeed, even the labels such as “aged”, “old”, “elderly”, and etc. that are unconsciously used, have particular connotations in itself and stigmatize people without consideration for a diversity of experiences: one can call “old” an active person in their 60s or a patient in the hospital in their 90s (Hazan, 1994, p.19).

Furthermore, it is crucial that the discourses of ageism are also achieved by the aged people in their self-representations. For example, Coupland (1997) illustrates that aged people are “*othering*” themselves in geriatrics acknowledging that in their age they should not expect good health condition as well as should not demand any solutions from medicine, doctors, and a state because they are old. Due to the ageist stereotypes, any “failures” of a body and mind that can occur with a person are interpreted with regard to their age (Hazan, 1994). This leads us to the pervasiveness of the stereotype that ageing is a degradation of the body.

The embodiment of ageing is crucial in our discussion because while ageing indeed goes hand in hand with senescence of a physical body, there is confusion in the social construction of this process. Stephen Katz (1997) identifies the nineteenth century as a benchmark for prioritizing the construction of the old body in a biological sense. Development of biomedicine with the emergence of clinical medicine (Katz 1996) has led to the discourse constructing an ageing body as a universal problem (Katz 2000), which is neither health, nor disease, and “both normal and pathological” at the same time (Tulle, 2015, p.127). Thus, one of the important discourses of ageism with regard to the biomedicalization dictates that it is normal that one inevitably becomes abnormal with ageing without regard to diversity of experiences, illnesses, and cases. At the same time, bodily ageing and especially disability and dependency have a negative status and constructed as a problem in a value system where the sign of a civilized person is their ability to control their body (Elias 1978).

Nevertheless, such negative construction of ageing should not diminish the agency of people that are influenced by *anti-ageing discourses*. Without a precise focus on ageing Foucault (1982) coined the concept of *biopolitics* stating that population is controlled through the people’s bodies that are claimed as manageable and should be managed. Pickard (2013) relates it to old age and ageing populations, which are perceived as a challenge to Western

economies so biopolitics accompanied with the neoliberal values promote the ideology that stresses the aged people's agency and responsibility to control their ageing. According to these, the bodily decline should be controlled, avoided or postponed because it is presented as primarily the result of an unhealthy and inactive lifestyle and, therefore, poor-decision making (Tulle 2008).

Although it seems that the belief of the importance of one's agency opened more opportunities for aged people to act, Katz (2000) in his analytical review *Busy Bodies* claims that it turned to a dictate, an ethos of an active society which discriminates those who do not follow it. For example, there is the spread of the discourse of ageing positively or successfully in Western societies that the author addressed in the wider political context of neoliberal ideals that aimed to "empower" weaker elements of society. Also originally proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1987), successful ageing focused on countering negative discourse of bodily decline by means of active engagement. However, criticisms of the idea of ageing positively and successfully point to its blindness to the diversity of ageing experiences. British scholar Sharon Wray (2003) criticizes the concept for its vagueness and inflexibility for people from heterogeneous ethnic and cultural backgrounds. While for British women to age positively means to stay independent, retain control over their life, contribute to society by being politically active, which is more related to western concepts of success, for many women from African-Caribbean, West Indian, Pakistani, British-Polish and Indian cultural backgrounds ageing successfully mean spiritual fulfillment and belonging to a community, "which could be gained through attending religious activities, prayer and holy pilgrimage" (Wray 2003, p. 520). This underlines the importance of the attention to *historical and cultural patterns* that also shape the experience of ageing.

Indeed, Joanna Elfving-Hwang (2016) proposed that the Western model of positive ageing and maintenance of positive image and femininity is not applicable to other cultural

contexts. The researcher studied aged South Korean women and their motivations for everyday beauty practices and claimed that compared to Western counterparts, Korean women did not intend to pursue youthfulness, rather they view these practices as “pleasurable rituals” because it is the sign of respect to people around. While I agree with the stress on the cultural perspective, I would disagree with the author that these practices are always “pleasurable rituals” for the women themselves because while some aged women can really enjoy these rituals, for others it is done in order to primarily meet social approval and not to cause troubles with a look of aged body and image that is allegedly “unpleasant”, which points to ageism be it cultural or “modern” one.

Only very recently Sarah Lamb (2019) based on her ethnographic research with the aged participants in the US has suggested that while discourses of ageism and anti-ageing discourses greatly contribute to the stigmatization of old age, the understanding of this process is still not sufficient without attention to culture and socio-economic status of people. Anti-ageing discourses are strong in the US because of its complexity that contains from biopolitics, values of the neoliberal economy, and biomedicine that urge people to deal with “negative” old age. However, this is an incomplete picture without the notion that these discourses reinforce and are reinforced by historical and cultural patterns such as “American individualist ideals about productivity, independence, self-reliance, and control over one’s bodies and futures” (Lamb, 2019, p.7). Therefore, dictates of anti-ageing discourses and such cultural and social specifics are achieved pragmatically during the interviews with aged people and leave almost no room for some alternatives to successful ageing in the US. Yet, it seems that Kazakhstani research participants are more liberated in this sense because while they reproduce anti-ageing discourses as well, sociocultural values often contradict rather than reinforce these discourses.

Moreover, this thesis fits the body of literature that addresses caregiving by the aged women. In this study, caregiving is predominantly related to the importance of a family where family members live together with or near to the aged women. It is very similar to the body of literature on caregiving, grandmothering, and two directional intergenerational support in East Asian societies like Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Malaysian (Lee & Bauer, 2010; Lee & Bauer, 2013; Kok & Yap, 2014; Chu, Xie & Yu, 2011; Cong & Silverstein, 2011; Lee, Parish & Willis, 1994; Sun, 2008) where along with collectivism, familism is a predominant form of social organization. However, while familism entails that the “interests of the individual are subordinated to those of the family group” (Heller as cited in Lee & Bauer, 2013), it is a too general concept to understand the diverse experiences of and motivations for caregiving by aged women.

Socio-economic context plays a great role in the extent of involvement of aged women in caregiving. For example, Korean, Japanese, and Malay Chinese societies are family-oriented but the aged women have different motivations to be involved in caregiving practices. Research shows that many aged Korean women from wealthier and healthier current cohort wish to spend their time not for caregiving practices but for personal interests (Kim & Chung, 2011). Likewise, Japanese aged women are more included to broader society and have high income due to the developed public policies regarding aged population, so they have more choice whether to devote themselves to a family or to have a way of life separate from adult children (Kok & Yap, 2014). Whereas the only joy for Malay Chinese aged women - who live primarily in rural areas in a poor socio-economic environment - is to continue to be devoted to their families, and maintain the sense of belonging to their families (Kok & Yap, 2014). This also points to the study by Melissa L. Caldwell (2004) in the post-Soviet Moscow that emphasizes the importance of informal support networks that become a key and are more important than other resources for the poorest segments of society where

elderly people were predominant in the social context of economic unpredictability and lack of state-provided safety.

Regarding the sociopolitical factors of caregiving, the public welfare system and state social policies are also significant for categorizing the nature of the intergenerational support. For example, Göransson (2013) suggests that in countries with more developed welfare system which takes some responsibilities for old people or children, such as Japan or Britain, intergenerational exchange of help is more “private matter” (Izuhara as cited in Göransson 2013, p. 65), compared to Singapore where the responsibility to help dependent parents is not only related to the Confucian concept of filial piety but also stipulated in special law. The state evaded its responsibility for the aged on a legal basis. Therefore, an intergenerational contract is far from being a private matter, rather it is highly formalized in Singapore that directly put the responsibility to look after old parents on families. Though it is more related to the upward intergenerational exchange such as from adult children to aged parents, this study shows that macro-level factors can influence the exchange of support within a family in the reverse direction as well. In other words, aged women are saving the failure of the state to provide affordable child care and, therefore, grandmothering also goes beyond “private matter” of a family.

Moreover, this thesis uses an approach that consider the complex nature of the discursive construction of ageing and old age that shape the strategies of the research participants, which include “modern” discourses of ageism, anti-ageing discourses, cultural patterns, and social context that include the economic and political environment of today Kazakhstan. The thesis argues that Kazakhstani women’s negotiation of ageing experience is influenced by various and often contradictory discourses, where sociocultural expectations play a significant role and might differ from Western ones qualitatively. Due to the special attention to the reasons of fluid age-identities negotiated by the research participants, this

thesis addresses the content of speaking not in a descriptive manner but with an attempt to explain why the aged women in Kazakhstan have certain recurrent patterns when talking about ageing, old age, age-identities of themselves and others, caregiving aspect of ageing experience, beauty, and etc.

### **Chapter 3. “Not Allowed to Get Old, Not Allowed to Stay Young”: Aged Women Negotiate Ageing, Old Age, and Femininity**

Interviews with Kazakhstani aged women point to multiple, complex and contradictory discourses on old age. There is a dominant discourse about ageing and old age that permeates the making of oldness by the research participants. First, they associate inevitable ageing with negative traits such as a loss of ability, depression, and dependency. Next, anti-ageing discourses dictate that everyone is responsible for “fighting” with oldness and its allegedly negative and inevitable consequences. Third, there are socio-cultural expectations concerning “later” stage of life that are based upon strong limits and some alternatives related to the way of life of an aged woman. Overall, the societal discourse about ageing is normative and does not consider individual experiences.

However, this study found that Kazakhstani aged women are not confused discourse recipients; rather they are active discourse producers. The research participants do not contest existing dominant discourses around old age, instead, these women engage in these discourses and use them strategically in different contexts to create fluid identities. I argue that the research participants unintentionally apply the strategy of shifting age-identities which enables them to negotiate their opportunities, rights, roles, and obligations. Therefore, such a strategy allows them to maintain a sense of control over their lives, to choose the most comfortable stance depending on the context and to navigate between contradicting discourses successfully.

This chapter discusses the ways Kazakhstani aged women performatively make ageing and their and others’ age-identities under the influence of broader discourses. First, I discuss the research participants’ way of constructing age-identities with regard to ageism that imply inevitable “othering” of people as they age, and present the strategies to deal with it without directly opposing ageist stereotypes. Then I address how the participants shift their age-identities around anti-ageing discourses that state that one must not accept ageing but is

responsible to postpone it as much as possible. Ultimately, I consider in which ways these discourses coexist with socio-cultural beliefs about the “later” life stage that has its merits and demerits.

The analysis of the interview data points to the discursive construction of oldness that is contextual. In other words, there are different understandings of old age and ageing depending on the context of speaking. During in-depth interviews, I asked questions that created different contexts and perspectives on this issue as well as the participants developed further contexts during the course of conversation. Initially, I asked the research participants a direct question without any special context: “There is a phrase - elderly people, do you consider yourself as elderly?” (*Est' takaya fraza - pozhilie lyudi, Vy schitaete sebya pozhiloi?*). Also, I asked to elaborate their opinions about when a Kazakhstani woman becomes elderly with a view to eliciting their understandings of oldness. Furthermore, I encouraged the research participants to talk about what being old or the later life stage means for them based on their experiences.

#### **“Life is over”: Discourses of ageism**

Predominantly, the research participants denied oldness as a response to the direct question whether they think of themselves as “elderly” due to the strong belief in ageist stereotypes. When talking about old age in general, they view ageing and old age as a negative thing that is inseparable from poorly evaluated traits for people such as indifference to life, senility of the body and mind, pessimism, loneliness, depression, dependency, and social isolation. According to the participants, those who are elderly are restricted by their health condition, “think that their life is over and left behind” because they have already seen, felt everything in life; they no longer “have interest in life” and “feel not needed”; oldness begins when a woman is not a part of society anymore (“*vypadaet iz sotsiuma*”) and when she “loses optimism” – she no longer wants anything and complains much. Overall, this is a

bleak picture of a potential Kazakhstani woman who falls to the “elderly” category constructed by the research participants.

However, even if the research participants resist categorizing themselves as elderly because they do not fit the negative stereotypes, the persistence of ageism is still strong to affect their fluid identities. For example, when Diana forgot something that she wanted to say, she shifted her identity from a person who denied oldness by pointing out “forever young soul” to a person who achieved oldness by means of ageist talk:

**Diana:** ...I haven't finished my thought because I forgot... You see, this is oldness. This is what is called senile dementia, especially since I hit my head hard in that car accident (laughs).

First, while forgetting something once during the two-hour-long interview can occur with any person of any age, only aged people are becoming subjects to ageist stereotypes where the forgetting becomes a sign of ageing as an inevitable decline. Second, even if Diana notes that she hit her head in a car accident, she prioritizes oldness as a source of the alleged difficulty related to mind. Moreover, the tone of speaking does not imply that she talks too seriously about the illness; rather the laugh (Jefferson, 1985) and ageist talk can show the participant's imperviousness to the painful topic of ageing as an inevitable process of decline in a body and mind.

Diana also demonstrates that her grandson is aware of what oldness can cause which points out the persistence of ageism and its stereotypes as the part of early socialization (DePallo et al., 1995):

**Diana:** I somehow come up to my grandson saying: “I'll do math with you [when you will be] in the fifth grade,” and he says: “I see, you don't want to get Alzheimer's disease” (laughs). Yes, he is an advanced child, although he is studying only in the fourth grade. [Already] knows what Alzheimer's disease is. They are more informed.

Diana's small grandson already has in mind that old people are related to Alzheimer's disease like nobody else are. However, the application of such stereotypes to all aged people

is not about “more informed” children but more likely the result of the pervasiveness of ageist discourses. This is not the reflection of reality because people tend to forget things but nobody relates it to such serious illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia until the aged people are in the focus of discussion.

Two participants who agreed to categorize themselves as elderly pointed out the negative aspects of their experience such as deteriorated quality of life is related to health problems. They do not deny being elderly or do not enter a discussion with the view to distinguish between them and others as a response to the question whether they think they are elderly or not because of the strong relation between bad health and ageing.

**Lena:** The quality of life has changed completely, I can't do anymore what I want, many of my desires [...] and habits are no longer possible because of the health that does not allow to do these.

Here, the woman agrees that she is elderly because of the health problems which she considers as the result of ageing. In other words, ageing per se is constructed as a disease. Yet, while ageing is indeed accompanied by bodily changes, ageing does not always play the predominant role in a decline of the assessed quality of life. For instance, later Lena said that health problems had occurred when she was forty-six – she had serious thyroid and heart problems. Still, due to the persistence of the ageist stereotypes Lena shifts the identity toward the one who is “sick” with oldness.

Sometimes the research participants played with the perspectives on ageing as a response to my question. As Hazan (1994) summarizes, the language related to ageing depends on the perspective on it – demography, policy-making, medicine, science, bureaucracy, and etc. Although oldness is usually evaluated as negative, the connotation of each of the perspective varies. For example, the participants might acknowledge that they are elderly according to the statistics because of their chronological age, and at the same time deny being elderly because of their self-perception that does not fit ageist stereotypes. The

following excerpt from the interview with Gul'nur who is sixty-one illustrates how the woman negotiate her identity while not opposing some chronological perspective on oldness simultaneously distinguishing herself from “others” who are stereotypically old:

**Gul'nur:** Well, I, of course, understand that in terms of ages I am an elderly person but anyway I think I am not *that* old because I am still not in my 70s... Although, when I will be 70 years old perhaps I will feel the same – like I am still not in my 80s and so on.

Initially, she referred to some demographic or bureaucratic definition of oldness that is imposed externally as if there is a chronological scale with marks that allows considering a person as elderly or “*that* old” depending on their chronological age. However, she immediately proves the inconsistency of this approach arguing that even when she will turn seventy years old she will think of those who are in their eighties as old but not of herself and so on. This is an example of the fluidity of identity of the research participants around different understandings of oldness. Moreover, it points out an ageist attitude that is “othering” people based on their age and neglecting individual experience. Therefore, it allows aged participants distinguishing between themselves who are exceptionally doing well and others who are old.

Likewise, due to the persistence of ageism, the participants often use forms of language that, conversely, emphasize or exaggerate their age and life stage in order to distinguish themselves – who do not fit the stereotypes - from others. Therefore, they do not oppose ageism but apply strategy to disavow themselves from its influence. The research participants refer to themselves as *babushkas* (grandmothers) in a sense of an older woman rather than kin definition or exaggerate their chronological age with a view to demonstrate that they are doing pretty well for the woman of the particular life stage. To illustrate, Zhanar who is 67 does it twice during the conversation. First, when recalling how she and some of her fellows of the same age were dancing at the celebration of a wedding (*toi*) in a restaurant:

**Zhanar:** [While dancing] I asked: “Well, young people (*molodezh'*), how about these *babushkas*?”

The young people showed respect to Zhanar in response to the fact that she was dancing because of her age. Apparently, it does not mean that she is dancing better than young and she does not exceed in dancing which would be likely socially sanctioned. Instead, Zhanar believes that she deserves to be commended just because she is willing to dance, she is attempting to dance, and she is moving and staying active in her ages. She distinguishes herself from those women of the same age category who are coming to the celebrations and then just sit, eat and discuss what is going on. Zhanar negatively evaluates such women because they are passive and has a negative attitude to everything around. The word *babushka* is used to emphasize her ages or stage of life avoiding negative connotation, here as well:

**Zhanar:** Sports equipment was established in the yard and ...they [grandchildren] did not know [how to use it], and I showed them. Everyone who was sitting there and watching [probably] was surprised “what this *babul'ka* can do” (laughs).

Again, she acknowledges the ageist expectations that imply a *babul'ka* (a different form of *babushka*) is unable to do what Zhanar still does. Therefore, even calling herself *babushka*, she evades ageist stereotypes for herself and is supposed to earn respect. Such a strategy is called *koketnichat'* by Diana with the rough English meaning “to posture”. She refers to herself as *starushka* (a mitigated form of “old woman”) with a view to point out that she is doing well because she does something that stereotypical aged women cannot do:

**Diana:** Sometimes I am posturing (*koketnichayu*) while saying [to my family]: “you are making *starushka* to do [something]”.

Another way of “posturing” is to exaggerate the chronological age. Here is the excerpt by sixty-one-year old Gul'nur where she is talking about helping her young neighbour who is pregnant, has to work and to take care of her four children:

**Gul'nur:** And I told her: "I don't see your friends helping you, nobody helps, neither relatives help. But why they do not come, do not help you to clean the windows? Whereas I - being at my seventh decade (*na sed'mom desyatke*) - came and cleaned [your apartment], for example"

Gul'nur negotiates her identity exaggerating her ages using this particular form of Russian where being in one's sixties is the same with "one in her seventh decade of the life". Perhaps, she does it to implicitly illustrate her outstanding for an aged woman behaviour that goes against the stereotypical images regarding non-aged and aged. Gul'nur, being in her seventh decade, helped to her neighbour, so she does not fit the stereotype that aged people are weak and require help themselves, whereas younger friends and relatives of this neighbour do not help her, although the ageism implies that compared to the aged people it is young ones who have the possibilities to help others.

#### **"Never give up!" Anti-ageing discourses**

If in certain contexts the research participants construct ageing and old age as an inevitable bodily decline, in other circumstances they shift their attention toward anti-ageing discourses that put the responsibility to "fight" or to "quit" oldness on individual. For example, Lidiya evaluates the will and endeavour to stay active and independent as individual's trait that is more important than deteriorated health condition. She sets an example of her husband and claims that it is still possible to be even disabled but not "really" old if one does not give up.

**Lidiya:** ...I mean my husband is disabled but I wouldn't say that he even once said: "It's over!". Like to give up...  
He does everything he is able to do, at home. Sometimes I help him, sometimes he is trying [himself]...he always finds something to do...

Also, she compares herself and her husband with people who are younger and healthier than them but who seems to her as older and more suitable to be considered as elderly because of their negative attitude to life. According to anti-ageing discourses, she

takes advantage from this comparison because their optimism and unwillingness to “give up” outweigh everything else and allow her to distinguish themselves from those who are even younger but should be labelled as old. Lidiya views one’s agency and responsibility for the quality of ageing experience as more important than deterioration of a body or chronological age.

Although ageism dictates that ageing is inseparable from bodily decline, anti-ageing discourses shift the responsibility to maintain good health by means of staying active, doing physical exercises to a person. For example, Raushan says of the importance of yoga (but not always do it), Gul’nur goes to the gym, Zhanar exercises daily, other women fight with overweight with a view to avoid deterioration of physical opportunities and dependence in future as much as possible: “when a person is sick they no longer can help themselves (*uzhe ne mozhet sam sebya obsluzhivat*)”. Dependence for the research participants is related to shame: “in order to my grandchildren not to be ashamed for me”. Surely, the relationship between dependence, having control over one’s body and shame on the other side is constructed by society (Goffman, 1959; Elias 1978). And no matter whether the participants really do popular physical activities or not, the fact that they talk about it with some moral overtone demonstrates them as active participants in the construction of anti-ageing discourses.

**Raushan:** Basically, I understand that it is *necessary* to do yoga every day. But today I was lazy so I just did a warm-up but did not do “asanas” while I *must* do it for my health.

Along with the physical aspect of ageing, the participants stress some inner motivations. For example, Aigul’ highlights the importance of self-representation as alleged non-old, as well as love, and happiness as the aspects of life that help an individual to disavow oldness. The following excerpt from the interview is her answer to whether she is elderly or not:

**Aigul'**: maybe it is presumed that I am elderly but I would not say I am *that* elderly. [...] First, one must love this world, love [their] children, nature... And it is also important how one represents herself... So I am not elderly. Because I am happy with my family so it is just years pass (*gody idut*).

Aigul' offers her strategy of shifting attention from ageism to anti-ageing. If those ones who are really elderly have quite miserable life without love and happiness, she continues to have it all while ageing is just a number of years. Moreover, self-representation plays a great role whether it is the way a woman behaves or takes care of herself. And conversely, Aigul' negatively assesses those fail to put efforts in their self-representation as not-old because she considers "quitting" as "unpleasant":

**Aigul'**: Some quit themselves [saying] "oh, I am old..." - one must not do like that.

**Interviewer**: Why?

**Aigul'**: Because they put themselves down (*sami sebya opuskaut*) so others also treat them badly. It is unpleasant (*nepriyatno zhe*).

There is an emergence of a moral base in Aigul's opinion because she discusses what is good and what is bad, pleasant or unpleasant, what one must and must not do in her age. The inability to self-represent one as not-old is undesirable in her age because of the other people's stereotypes. According to the participants, usually, self-representation as not old is about the continuity of being what one was and doing what one did before ageing.

Similarly, continuity for aged women is related to continuity of performing femininity. The research participants believe that people's appearance and especially women's appearance should be maintained to be positive. The participants claim that an aged woman must not relegate everyday beauty practices to a secondary role because it is as important as the role of a grandmother and other aspects of life. Yet, another issue is that they cannot always meet this model for themselves on practice because to reconcile so many activities is difficult. Still, in terms of maintenance of good appearance they use strong statements such as:

“I *always* wear makeup”, “one *must definitely* use face cream”, “it is *necessary* to have pedicure, manicure”, “I *will not go out* if I have not done something (about beauty practices)”.

Indeed, the women admire those who do not “quit themselves” (*brosayut sami sebya*) in terms of beauty when ageing and even dying because it is believed that this is the sign of love for oneself:

**Lidiya:** And if, of course, one quits everything ... one can even look at thirty years old as one of sixty years old. So one should love oneself, they say.

I had such a friend [...] when she was already stuck in her bed, she asked to apply a cream on her face every day, to do her eyebrows. She asked: “if I will die, put makeup on my face”. She believed that she should always be beautiful and even in death. [...] I welcome such attitude, it is good.

Lidiya demonstrates the idea that the love for oneself is inseparable from maintaining a positive self-image. She evaluates such attitude as right one and admires the woman who was not even capable to do beauty rituals but it remained important for her. Moreover, she remained in Lidiya’s memory as the one who did not “quit”.

If beauty practices have a meaning of continuity of what women did for all their life so to “quit themselves” probably means to “quit to oldness” which associates with indifference. Some view this maintenance of femininity as something special for their cohort as “we got used to doing it, we are old-guard” (*staroi zakalki*), and emphasize that today they have more favourable conditions for self-care because of the variety of products available. For instance, Anna who previously admitted label “elderly” for herself because of the perceived worsened health conditions, still thinks that a woman in her ages should have self-care procedures rather than stop caring about the way she looks:

**Anna:** I have the image of an appropriate way of looking. But in order to look like this perhaps I don’t have enough money (laughs). Well, look, I think a woman has to take care of her appearance (*zhenshchina dolzhna sledit’ za soboi*). [There is a need in] a hairdresser and a cosmetologist...and creams... and the appropriate

clothes... And I don't think I have enough money for these now. But anyway I am trying to do what I can do. I am trying to avoid turning into real *babushka*.

The participants - like Anna who is 67 – share a view on the appropriate appearance of a woman in their ages because they are not fully liberated from the social pressure to perform the femininity and beauty practices. In the passage above the ideal image implies a woman who can afford caring beauty practices and dressing. Such attitude illustrates not only the discourse that dictates aged women to continue paying attention to how they look but also the connection of this discourse with the consumerism ideologies (Katz 2000). In order to achieve relatively ideal for their age result, many research participants believe that they have to consume special products, use the services of the skilled hairdressers and cosmetologists, and spend money on new stylish clothes. While Anna shows awareness of such an ideal model, she cannot afford to follow it. Then her strategy is to assure the interviewer that she still uses affordable oils, creams, facial masks which she can buy in any pharmacy in order to escape the opposite from the ideal image for an aged woman - “real” *babushka*. *Babushka* here is not about its kin meaning because Anna has already been a grandmother for many years – her oldest grandson is in his late twenties. Becoming a real *babushka* means here the stereotypical image of an old woman who is already indifferent to the way she looks because it is not important for her and who does not take care of herself. Thus, Anna demonstrates that she does not quit in face of ageing completely and, although she is elderly because of her diminished health and relative social isolation (she also emphasized the importance of being needed as a professional), she distinguishes herself from others who are really old.

While Anna does not specify where anti-ageing ideas come from, Gul'nur clearly states where her position about what is contemporary Kazakhstani aged woman should look like drives from. She is interested in “sociological literature” about the adjustment to later life and its normative ideas about the appropriate appearance in this age, as well as she is an

active user of Instagram where she follows pages that share information and suggestions regarding the healthy lifestyle and fashion. To illustrate, she quotes the phrase from a book on later life: “aged mother should not look worse than her daughter, rather she should try to look better”. She agrees with this statement because it is an important strategy to “fight” with oldness in its negative sense:

**Gul’nur:** If they [old people] are poorly dressed, they cause nothing but pity. But when an old woman or an old man dressed well and *modern*, their look is completely different and the attitude towards them is different - they do not cause pity then.

Gul’nur stresses the need to pay even more efforts to the dress-code for aged people in order to keep up with “modern” styles, to look neat and with dignity, and never wear something that left by other family members with a view to avoiding pity - the feeling a look of an aged body can cause.

In terms of Gul’nur’s gender-age-identities, she highlights the performing femininity and anti-ageing identity. For example, she continues to put everyday makeup because first, she is used to doing it as a woman, and second, at her ages and with wrinkles that emerged there is a “double demand” (*dvoinoi spros*) from her as being an aged woman. In terms of dressing, she demonstrates an interesting point transforming the word *babushka* based on the idea about the appropriate look for the aged people:

**Gul’nur:** In terms of clothes, I will never wear really grannyish clothes (*babushkinskie veshchi*). I even don’t allow this to my mother (who is in her late 80s).

Again, already being a grandmother for three grandchildren the participant does not imply kin term here, rather she is talking about a stereotypical old woman and her style of dressing. Aigul’ shifts her identity toward anti-ageing discourses that help her to distinguish herself from negatively evaluated “grannyish clothes” (*babushkinskie veshchi*) and to show her agency. Generally, from the accounts of the participants, old women’s wardrobe includes

old-fashioned and tacky clothes, overly bright, with unnecessary jewellery, usually with a headscarf, and where the long skirt is preferable to trousers. It is evident that Gul'nur evaluates such dress-code negatively and select the appropriate, in her opinion, look for herself and even for her mother who is in her late eighties avoiding resemblance with the alleged *babushkinskie veshchi*.

Interestingly, the theme on the appropriate dressing is related to the importance of family because generally, the research participants do not consider the aged people separately from their families. Gul'nur places the responsibility for the “dress-code” of the aged people to their family members who should help them materially or by advising in questions of appearance. For example, she even identifies the attitude and respect for the aged person by their family depending on the way they look at the celebrations such as *toi* (wedding in Kazakh). Yet conversely, for another woman, her family is the motivation to “keep up with fashion” and for everyday beauty practices because she would “let them down” (*podvodit'*) in the eyes of society if she stopped taking care of her appearance:

**Aigul'**: [...] otherwise they will say: “her grandchildren, children are so good-looking but the grandmother looks haphazardly”

### **Negotiating ageing as a life stage: Opportunities and limits**

Finally, even though the women participate in the construction of anti-ageing discourses with a view to “fight” and do not “quit” to oldness, they are liberated and at the same time limited from the pursuit of youthfulness and its standards due to Kazakhstani sociocultural ideals regarding the life course. It is negatively evaluated for Kazakhstani aged women to do much of what younger women do. These limits are summed up by the research participants also with the use of strong words such as an aged woman “*must* look more moderate (*bolee strogo*)”, “*surely* should change style”, “clothes *must not* be *provocative*” (*vyzyvayushchei*), “women with age *must not* (*nel'zya*) have very bright makeup”. Therefore,

it would be wrong to claim that the participants just continued beauty practices because actually they reassessed the nature and extent of the practices according to the social limits that have been emerged with age.

The research participants equilibrate the pressure to keep performing femininity and showing pleasant for others image with the socio-cultural limits of such behaviour related to their age. In terms of overall appearance that includes beauty practices, the aged women again. Kazakhstani aged women in the study view beauty practices with face, hair, dressing, and etc. as still an important part of the ageing experience because it is primarily the sign of respect to people around rather than the pursuit of youthfulness. As Aigul' points out, beauty is necessary because it is pleasant for those who see it: "it is like when you go to a birthday party and buy beautiful flowers because everyone will enjoy them". However, beauty for the aged women and beauty for young ones is different. Aigul' defines beauty as tidiness in terms of good smell, well-dressing, manicure, pedicure, moderate makeup, and so on. The "components" can vary from woman to woman, but there is a pattern of negotiating some "light" understanding of the beauty that is reduced to some decent and tidy appearance, and where beauty practices are limited.

While according to the anti-ageing discourses, one is responsible for the way she looks because she can quit or not quit in face of ageing, simultaneously it is highlighted that a woman is not capable to stop ageing so one should accept it. Any attempts to "get back one's youth" (*molodit'sya*) will be considered as "not natural" (*iskusstvenno*) and "just ridiculous" (*prosto smeshno*). For example, it is evident from the strong opposition to more fundamental beauty practices such as plastic surgery or liposuction by the participants. Gul'nur views this approach as not useful because it is not natural and there will not be a long-term result when she thinks about liposuction. While the result from fitness and exercises is not always long-term, it is still more preferable. Zhanar says that surgeries and botox as not only expensive

and dangerous for life practices but also inappropriate in her age. Diana also emphasizes that it is not natural and the lost individuality of a woman who decided to go through such practices. They agree that everything should be according to age and balanced (*vse dolzhno byt' v meru*).

Indeed, although the aged women are not fully liberated from the dictate of beauty and femininity due to the anti-ageing discourses, due to some socio-cultural expectations regarding the later life they are capable to liberate themselves by means of shifting an identity toward limitations of the life stage. Such limitations can be advantageous for women because they gain some freedom from objectification with age. This creates paradoxical situations when a woman negotiates anti-ageing ideas on continuity “fighting” with overweight, but simultaneously liberates herself from the too strict commitment to this course. Lidiya who previously showed admiration for those women, who maintain positive image until their death, shifts the attitude when talking about herself:

**Lidiya:** Of course, I would really like to lose weight now (laughs), at least a little. Sometimes I drop a few pounds, and sometimes I gain them again. Here it is. I basically react calmly to this. I think that if the weight comes with age, it's okay. The main thing is that I move, and that's it. The rest doesn't really bother me much.

In the passage above, Lidiya shifts the attention from the weight as an important part of a positive appearance for women to the weight as a matter of health. Lidiya claims that for now, her weight allows her to stay active and feel healthy and this is the priority. While the general standards of beauty become less important for the participants, they negotiate their fluid identity towards these cultural dictates of what is possible for the aged women when it is suitable for them.

Moreover, although the participants do not want to be associated with oldness in terms of clothes, the finding is that the range of possible styles that are neither “grannyish” nor “ridiculous” for the aged women in Kazakhstan is very limited. While the participants

feel liberated from traditional expectations regarding what to wear in favour of their own comfort, simultaneously they are restrained to wear a variety of clothes that is deemed to be appropriate only for younger people. For example, at home Gul'nur prefers sportswear such as not slim-cut leggings and T-shirts and negatively assesses housecoats such as *khalat* because she prioritizes comfort and because it is associated with tacky clothes. She would never wear shorts or mini-skirt because of the social sanctions which she considers to be "our mentality". She needs comfortable wearing for various housekeeping and caregiving activities that require a free range of motions: "the movements are not constrained", "active way of life". As casual she wears jeans, trousers, denim long skirt, comfortable shoes or trainers. As more formal wear she emphasizes that her style is "feminine", with stylish jewellery and where combinations of colour must look good together. She distinguishes herself from those who become indifferent to the ways they look with ageing and those who dress as "old" in its negative sense. Therefore, due to anti-ageing discourses she even does not pay attention to the condemnation that she feels from some traditional people whom she defines as "our Kazakhs" regarding wearing jeans by her and her 87-year-old mother. Nevertheless, she does not contest the idea that aged cannot wear what young wear, and, in turn, does not exceed cultural limitations too much.

Furthermore, if most participants stress the need for continuation in terms of *staying* active, positive, *keep* wearing what they want, they know age limits of such behaviour. Gul'nur thinks she can violate some traditional norms and negative stereotypes about aged people in terms of passive way of life, indifference, dependency, etc.; but some norms are still important to follow. For example, she seeks advice from her daughter to avoid the situation where she can be perceived as ridiculously dressed for her age:

**Gul'nur:** Sometimes when I am getting dressed I ask my daughter: "what do you think about these jeans? Do they suit me?" Sometimes.

When I feel it's good I don't ask. ... And I listen to her because of the age, *the seventh decade* and in order to avoid looking ridiculous.

While everyone can want to hear someone's advice about the way they look, Gul'nur emphasizes her age as the main reason for asking the opinion of the adult daughter. Otherwise, clothes such as too slim-cut that are perceived as suitable for those who are younger can place her in an embarrassing situation.

Likewise, the participants have taboo wears such as clothes that open legs and arms, or with cleavage as well as other restrictions. Indeed, every participant agrees that the aged women have to hide their aged bodies because the look of saggy skin or body parts that are not thin are not beautiful and even called by one woman as "old human's abnormalities" (*starcheskie otkloneniya*) that would bother people around. There are certain exceptions for the women who are "lucky" enough to avoid these alleged consequences of ageing. For example, Zhanar is 67 but says she has "good genes" so she has not gained weight and has relatively tight skin and she feels to be allowed to wear skirts and dresses up to her knees and even show her arms up to the shoulders. However, she clearly understands that the choice of dressing in her age can improve her social position or vice versa marginalize her:

**Zhanar:** There are some clothes... that establish particular status. Because, after all, I am not young. It is immediately visible, even though one can put make-up [to hide the age], she can't wear short clothes anymore.

When I am *babka* like that [...] If I wore a short skirt and go, they would say that I am stupid (*dura*) or something.

In the excerpt above the participant polarizes the clothes that are perceived as the symbols of higher status from the clothes that are perceived as the signs of inadequacy or some mental problems for the aged woman. On the one hand, Zhanar views ageing as inevitable and non-manageable with strategies such as make-up. According to this view, one cannot hide the signs of ageing and everyone can categorize her as already not-young. On the other hand, she has the agency to manage her social status within the social limits imposed

with ageing by choosing, for example, “appropriate” for her life-stage dressing style. She remains the aged woman in the eyes of society with all the stereotypes about them. Yet, she will be evaluated as doing pretty well if she is dressed appropriately and knows her place of a person who cannot access particular dress-codes anymore.

Similarly, cultural values surrounding the life course affect the behaviour of Kazakhstani aged women by means of othering them as some kind of moral compasses rather than ordinary people. The participants who disavow themselves from elderly identity, later negotiated their limits and opportunities of being a woman of their age without contesting the arising socio-cultural expectations. Along with the limits on trying “to get back one’s youth” (*molodit’sya*) which is negatively assessed, the research participants believe that there are actions that Kazakhstani aged women *must not* do anymore. The list of age limits by the research participants includes the following “must nots”: have drinking and smoking habits, swear, show intense emotions especially in terms of laugh and rage, conflict or argue with people, insult people in response to the insulting, exceed in dancing or singing or speaking, remarry, flirt or have romantic relationships. At the same time, women are believed to gain wisdom, calmness, and patience with age. All of these limits and gains should be used in showing example to younger family members, and other people around. Otherwise, the aged women are to be socially sanctioned and labelled as inadequate and generally inappropriate. For instance, Nataliya understands that if she behave as she did when were younger, others would think of her as “old woman is out of her mind” (“*babka iz uma vyzhila*”). She believes that she “has no right” (“*ne imeyu prava*”) to fight, to have a scandal, to drink alcohol when there are her children and small grandchildren because she is supposed to show example for them. However, this her belief coexists with identity who continues to do what she wants to do when there are no people around to whom she has to be a living example:

**Nataliya:** When we are relaxing at dacha [with sisters of the same age], we are drinking a little wine. But when there are children, it is

not allowed to have more than one glass. We have to show the example.

As we can see, it is not natural that Nataliya stopped drinking alcohol with age, rather she follows socio-cultural expectations adapting to any contexts. The flexibility and fluidity of her age-identity does not require contesting dominant cultural values, and at the same time allows them to continue doing what she wants if it is done covertly. This is even more evident from the interview with Lidiya. Initially, she denied the applicability of the term “elderly” to her, later she used herself as an example of appropriate behaviour of an elderly woman because she behaves as a low-key and wise to give people advice, and then revealed that in reality she continues to be the same person as she did when was younger but just hide it:

**Lidiya:** [...] if being young you were allowed to flirt or something, now you have to behave moderately [...] even to talk with people in a different way. [...] to suppress an inappropriate laugh. I think so. [...] Many people come to me for advice[...].

**Interviewer:** But what about laughing, flirting...Don't you want to do this at all?

**Lidiya:** No, I love it. I like telling funny stories, like listening them and laughing, and singing the songs and *chastushki*<sup>4</sup>. But anyway it must not go beyond some limits. Yes. Because of the age, after all, we have to behave more covertly (laughs).

If to a direct question whether she thinks of herself as elderly Lidiya replies that she is not very elderly person because she has a young soul, further this strategy to dichotomize body and soul is not working because she says that this “young soul” should be mostly hidden.

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<sup>4</sup> Traditional Russian folk song that is usually short, humorous, sarcastic, or ironic.

#### **Chapter 4. Caregiving: Negotiating Ageing, Gender Roles, Society and Culture**

As it is shown in the previous chapter, Kazakhstani aged women apply the strategy of shifting the age-identity to reconcile contradictory discourses regarding ageing and old age. This chapter aims to show that the core theme of caregiving that the research participants brought up frequently is the aspect of their ageing experience that brings the discourses of ageism, anti-ageing, and socio-cultural expectations all together, and helps make sense of the apparent contradictions between these discourses.

That is, discourses of ageism are “othering” aged women by means of negotiating their allegedly reduced opportunities because they do not contribute to the broader society “properly” since they are no longer involved in the labour market. In turn, the research participants do not contest it - they negotiate one of the reasons for taking the responsibility for caregiving in terms of free from work time that they compensate with caregiving practices, rather than spend time for their own pleasure. Moreover, caregiving is negotiated as a facet of life that *continues* to be is socially and culturally normative for the research participants being women and being aged. Furthermore, anti-ageing discourses reinforce importance of caregiving due to the ideas of one’s responsibility to “fight” ageing by staying active, keep doing meaningful and useful practices that give immediate or long-term results, whereas caregiving is negotiated as including all these components of ideal ageing as well.

Based on interview data with Kazakhstani aged women, I argue that the importance for the research participants of the negotiation of caregiving and caregiver identity is complex because it consolidates, is shaped by, and allows reproducing dominant discourses retaining sense of control and dignity and without danger to be socially sanctioned. From the accounts of Kazakhstani research participants, an aged woman who is actively engaged in caregiving kills at least three birds by one stone without going beyond age norms shared in Kazakhstani society. Ideally, she is believed as a proper one and is to be socially praised. First, the chapter

gives the definition of caregiving based on what Kazakhstani aged women said. Second, the arguments on the importance and complexity of negotiation of the caregiving are outlined. Next, evidence from the data is presented to support the arguments.

The research participants emphasize that care for their families as well as other people around is significant aspect of their everyday experience. While caregiving practices varies from woman to woman, the research participants claim that they are providers of continuous help and support which can be divided to material and non-material. Material help includes care as unpaid labour such as household chores and/or grandmothering, as well as financial support, gift giving, and etc. For example, most of the research participants engaged in cleaning, cooking, shopping for groceries, ironing, laundry (all have washing machines), work in a *dacha* or *ogorod* (garden) if they have any with a view to produce food for a household, babysitting, tutoring, controlling and facilitating the educational process of a grandchild and so on. Moreover, there is also an important place of non-material care as relationships with the family members, relatives or former colleagues, emotional support, giving of love, affection, and etc.

The neglect of the importance of caregiving that is continuously provided by the aged women, probably, rest upon the questionable assumption that there is a distinction between “real” work, which is usually waged, and invisible unpaid labour such as housework or caring for family members. And while retired aged women due to the discourses of ageism construe care work they fulfil day-to-day unworthy of recognition on a bigger level such as for society or state, caregiving was the most often raised and important theme in terms of research participants’ agency as the caregivers. Furthermore, socio-cultural expectations play crucial role in discursive interpretation of caregiving. First, caregiving is a continuation of performing gendered cultural expectations. Simultaneously, caregiving practices fit life course expectations of what Kazakhstani aged woman should and should not to do in this

particular life stage. Also, the research participants view their caregiving practices as a social norm that is an alternative to the mistrusted institutions controlled by the state. Finally, the emphasis on the continuation of caregiving resonates with anti-ageing discourses. By means of negotiating that the research participants continue to give rather than take, they provide a basis to legitimately oppose the ageist stereotypes about dependency, senility and powerlessness that inevitably accompany ageing. Caregiving is interpreted as facet of ageing experience that allows the research participants to continue feeling needed, contributing, and working, although without payment and wide recognition..

### **Caregiving is a gendered cultural expectation**

The research participants take housekeeping for granted as their primary responsibility because it is what “every ordinary woman does” (*chto delaet obychnaya lyubaya zhenshchina*). Household chores constitute a lot of the aged women’s time, even if they have the husbands who are also retired. Such kind of caregiving usually is a continuation from the participants’ past. When the research participants worked on a full time job they were responsible for housekeeping as well. However, being retired, the women still spend free from work time for chores and other caregiving practices rather than for the personal interests, self-development, business and etc. They rather go even deeper into the domestic duties due to the adopted nurturing character. Surely, the fact that women do this work and can do it better because of practice, does not necessarily mean that they like to do it.

There are the cases when aged husbands share some domestic duties with the research participants, though the division of labour remains gender based and women do the most of the work regardless whether they like it or not. For instance, Diana calls shopping for groceries as really men’s activity because when she and her husband are both retired he takes this responsibility while she is cooking, cleaning, help her daughter with a grandson, and etc.:

**Diana:** My husband likes going shopping, bazaars, [...] well purely (*chisto*) men's work [...]. He probably likes communication (*obshchat'sya*) [there]. [As for me] I sometimes don't want to go out.

When she is talking about duties of her husband she operates within the context of what he likes to do. However, later in the conversation speaking about herself, she admits that she does not like cooking but must do it because of the various reasons that constitute complexity of caregiving. Yet, she also do it because she is a woman. Moreover, her reasoning for treating shopping as “men's work” is, probably, supported with internalized separation of public sphere as men's one because shopping includes going outside the home, to crowded places like bazaars, talking with people and etc., while she likes staying at home, which is a private and women's sphere. The way she essentializes gender roles in this particular case illustrates the persistence of internalized gender stereotypes.

Even though the research participants understand chores as gendered activity, if they live with other women who are younger than them (in the case of the study it is adult daughters, none of the daughters-in-law lived with the participants), the aged participants are still in charge of everyday domestic responsibilities because younger women usually work and are able to contribute to the housekeeping only on evenings and weekends. There are the excerpt from the interview with Lena who lives with adult daughter and ten-year-old granddaughter:

**Interviewer:** Who is responsible for cleaning, cooking, etc.?

**Lena:** Me, of course. I don't even mention it. *Ogorod, zagotovki*<sup>5</sup>, it's all on me.

The woman represents her responsibility for chores in their suburban house and garden as something needless to say. Later she presented these activities as a continuation in a sense because she did these things when she was young and worked as a teacher in school while her daughters were children and she was married - then she divorced. Today when

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<sup>5</sup> *Ogorod* – a garden with vegetables, fruits; *zagotovki* - food preparations.

Lena is retired she does it again because her daughter - who is also divorced - works and her granddaughter is a child. What has changed is Lena's health that deteriorated after the thyroid surgery she had. And while some women in the study do not represent everyday housekeeping as a heavy task, for Lena and some other women chores are hard work that requires more time compared to their past:

**Lena:** I now live on these hormones. [It is] difficult [...] I sweat, then fatigue is terrible. I lie down, but you can't lie much, [at least] for 10 minutes, [because] then you [would] not get up. I lie down, then I go back to work.

Finally, if the fulfilling of household chores is unpaid labour, it is also usually unnoticed, however, the lack of this work done is easily observed by family members of the responsible for this aged woman:

**Lena:** I am using WhatsApp now, texting, reading some news. How it is addictive! I couldn't imagine that I would use it [so much]. And they [family members] are not happy with it because the grandma worked in a kitchen but now I sometimes goof off (*sachkuyu*).

Furthermore, some of the research participants who have granddaughters highlight the need to pass on caregiving skills to them. These aged women view maintaining order at home or working in a garden as an example for granddaughters. They believe that teaching and involving girls to housekeeping practices is important because these will be useful for granddaughters' future marriage and therefore future position of the woman of a household. The approach to girls is viewed as different from the approach for boys:

**Aigul':** [compared to the grandsons] I teach the girls more how to cook and bake, [...] these are the lessons for their future, when they will get married.

While the ability to cook is useful skill for all people, the participant stresses the gender-based aspect of cooking as traditionally women's duty, especially when a woman is married. The woman also highlights that she engages granddaughters to cooking activities with a view to pass on these skills for them, for their benefit. Therefore, the altruistic, "giver"

aspect is represented, compared to the imagined “taker” aspect if the aged woman would involve girls because she needs somebody to help her, facilitate her labour and so on. Although it is possible that there are both aspects in caregiving as showing an example, no one in the study pointed out some “egoistic” self-interest in this activity.

Gendered moral values are also significant part of moral education that grandmothers can pass on being aged women. For example, Lena claims that it is crucial to teach her three granddaughters that they have to be literally “untouchable” for boys because it is related to behavior of a proper woman:

**Lena:** I tell her: “don’t allow boys to touch you! [...] You have to be inaccessible (*nedostupna*), you have to be dignified (*gorda*)”.

As a former school-teacher Lena saw many times how boys sexually harassed girls touching them, lifting their skirts and etc. However, she shifts the whole responsibility for this to girls only because she thinks that boys are just still stupid so it is the girls who should behave properly and suppress boys’ particular actions or intentions firmly.

Generally, caregiving as grandmothering is a significant facet of the ageing experience for the women in this study because it meets cultural life course expectations well. Grandmothering practices require special attention because of their complexity as well and are discussed later in greater detail. It is sufficient to note here that most women point out an active participation in fostering and/or educating their grandchildren, as well as affectionate relations with them. Even in the cases when the grandchildren live in different countries and the research participants are not involved into grandmothering, they still emphasize that they really miss it. This is due to the belief that the role of a grandmother is inseparable from women’s experience of ageing.

While caregiving by the aged women in this study is primarily oriented to their families, Raushan who lives alone and has no children does not emphasize the importance of

this facet of life. Yet, she still gives a high priority to caregiving practices for women. Religion holds the crucial part of her ageing experience and after Raushan retired she obtained more time to be committed to a various caregiving practices within the religious group she belongs to. For example, religious services such as cooking for religious celebrations, cleaning, washing the dishes after, and etc. are assigned to her by her “spiritual mentor” and she is happy to perform such type of service to God. Also, relatives are the second important aspect of her life. She placed a strong emphasis to the recollections about the time spent with her nieces and nephews. Raushan also visits two times a week her eighty-year-old mother and help her with domestic duties. The lack of her own children does not diminish her activity as a caregiver.

Caregiving is also the way for an aged woman to earn love and respect. For example, when we discussed the theme of beauty, which is deemed to be important for women, Raushan expressed the opinion that the beauty *per se* ceases to be important for women with age, and their “beauty” is in the caregiving for the family. While she does not have grandchildren, she still reproduces this belief on the example of her aged mother who share and earn love by means of caregiving:

**Raushan:** What grandmothers are loved for? [...] granddaughters of my mother always recall [they said]: “*Apa* (grandmother in Kazakh) cook us *bashbarmak*”. And mother began...she tried to cook what they liked. This is love. That is why they love her.

Furthermore, it seems that grandmothering is a cultural expectation for the aged women who are retired because they have time and can spend it to their grandchildren rather than to themselves. Some view grandmothering as a way to compensate love and affection they could not give to their children because they were busy at work at their young years and middle-ages. Some of the participants who are involved in caregiving as grandmothering highlight the importance of the positively interpreted emotions such as love, affection,

tenderness, trust and pride that they find in the interactions with their grandchildren. Relationships with their grandchildren are positively evaluated, whereas the theme of romantic relationships with partners was not supported by the research participants. On the one hand, the new stage of life accompanied with official retirement allows focusing on pleasant activities instead of concerns like earning money and so on. However, the same “new stage of life” simultaneously prohibits other kinds of pleasant relationships, for example with men, partners and while the aged women present grandmothering as a source of love and affection, none of them mentions romantic, sexual intercourse. Moreover, some participants view this as pointless at their age. For example, when I asked Lena whether she want to remarry someone, she said that she does not see any meaning in this *now* and closed the discussion showing that it is a tabooed topic. However, the emotions about her granddaughters are really meaningful for her:

**Lena:** For me now in the first place in my life is neither health, nor any other thing, it is my granddaughters. [...] The warmth just melts my heart when I think about them. This is my life, this is what I live now for.

In the same vein some participants feel free to talk about love and pleasure they take when their small grandchildren hug and kiss them, say they love them, and trust their secrets or about the sense of affection and pride when the participants watch the videos and pictures of the grandchildren on their smartphones. Finally, some of the participants do not divide love for their children and grandchildren but view the particular relation to the latter in the fact that they are small, cute, and “sweet” (*“sladkie”*), which points out the child-centered nature of culture. Finally, the research participants view that women are better in emotional work so, ideally, they are responsible for building and supporting harmonic relations within their families which is also a part of caregiving. For example, Aigul’ claims that men are fragile and not patient so she tries to retain harmonic environment with her husband and adult children by herself.

Moreover, the aged women in the study support the ideal image of an aged person who takes the responsibility to solve some of the problems instead of being a burden for their family. Therefore, it is socially praised when an aged woman helps with domestic tasks and grandmothers. Again, Raushan who lives alone, reproduces this beliefs:

**Raushan:** [...] in a sense that a woman tries to live and not to be burden for their children, instead she tries to help... I don't mean financial support, but for example if a grandmother at home, she can cook something delicious – to do what she likes.

However, thinking that the model where aged women who help instead of causing troubles is mutually beneficial in a sense that cooking is anyway “what she likes” does not reflect the reality for all. The acceptance of caregiving as primarily women's activities does not mean that the aged women perceive caregiving practices as something they like doing. Rather they feel informally obligated to help family members who need some assistance, which is also resonates with caregiving as social norm and is discussed later. The attitudes to fulfilling the household chores range from the positive as the activity that the women like doing, to negative as “invisible bonds” and inability to disrupt them:

**Lidiya:** Well, you know, I think I like doing everything, I like cooking some new dishes, try to make something more delicious... I really like ironing the laundry, there are some people who do not like it, but I love it. I also didn't like it before, but now I love ironing. [I like] cleaning [thoroughly], so that it would be clean in all the corners.

**Interviewer:** Is there something that you would like to change in your daily routine?

**Anna:** Well, maybe I'm strongly attached to everyday household chores ... but again, I made such a schedule myself, I already have such obligations, I can't step over them...

**Interview:** Do you like cooking?

**Diana:** No, I don't. But I do it because I must do it.

### Caregiving as a social norm

The research participants also perceive caregiving as a social norm under particular social conditions of contemporary Kazakhstan that they evaluate as unstable and problematic

as well as with regard to some personal problems of the cared ones. They demonstrate some mistrust to other institutions such as the welfare state that is not functioning well. Therefore, it becomes normative to informally help to each other. They represent themselves as those who can and should help and support people around, and family members in particular. Especially, the aged women view that young generation need their help because of the social conditions and challenges they are facing today and caregiving usually becomes such help.

The participants compare the social order of their youth with the current one and think that broader society is no longer stable. As Diana points out, “social order had changed, life became more alarming, more dangerous, [...], problematic”. Also, Aigul’ outlines the spectrum of the challenges of “difficult life” for those who are young in contemporary Kazakhstan as follows: while in the Soviet times people “worked according to the specialty they gained with the diploma as it is should be”, today’s even educated young people experience the high rates of unemployment; they also received their own apartment by the state and their small children were provided with anything they need (*ni v chem ne nuzhdalis*) in past, while today the young have to spend almost all of their earnings for renting an apartment or repaying a mortgage; finally, people lived in greater solidarity, “at that time we were more friendly (*druzhnee*), it was different than now”. The participants emphasize that it was only required from them to work hard and they were sure that the state would support them and they believed to the bright future of a country, but they characterize current socio-economic situation by uncertainty. In addition, some aged women who have grandchildren point out inadequate work of the state that does not provide appropriate child care – it is almost impossible to get a place in state kindergartens – while some private nurseries or preschool centers are not affordable. In such realities the aged women normalize caregiving for those who are young:

**Aigul'**: The most important now is to support the young with all one can do, we have already lived our lives (*a my uzhe prozhili*), we are not in need, we have gold, and clothes, and mink fur coats, to be honest we're good. It is necessary to support youth, they don't have enough time and money.

Even though Aigul' uses at the first glance ageist phrase that they have already lived their lives, the woman demonstrates herself in a position of power in terms of the material possessions and she thinks that it is expected to support young who are weaker in that sense. Although there are varied economic statuses among the aged women in the study, the pattern is that caregiving is important, because the support should not be necessary financial but "with all one can do".

Caregiving as a social norm that is specific for Kazakhstani society is also seen in the participants' awareness that the aged people in some other societies live differently and do not committed to caregiving much. For example, Diana relates the importance of the caregiving for family, adult children, grandchildren to the specific 'mentality' of 'our' aged women compared to the Western counterparts who "live for themselves". She believes that one of the reasons for this is overall social anxiety and uncertainty. This is the excerpt from the interview when we were discussing adult children and the aged women's part in their lives:

**Diana:** We are caregiving (*pestuem*), unlike other people, I mean [people] of other mentality, other group of nationalities, let's say. [...] [Western model] is not for our realities. At least for now, it is not suitable. Perhaps when society will become more socially protected, more stable, in economic and moral sense...

The participant understands the Western model of ageing as something specific to individualistic societies, where aged parents live separately from their adult children and have minimal mutual help while spending their time and money to enjoy their later life. However, she claims that this would be a possible scenario for Kazakhstani women under the conditions of stability in almost all facets of public life. There is a strong relation between private and

public sphere. Thus, if there was more stable environment in socio-economic and moral sense, the woman would spend less time and energy to caregiving.

While they do not pass judgement on their imagined western counterparts who live primarily for their own pleasure, the unwillingness of a Kazakhstani aged woman to support family members materially, emotionally or with any other ways is negatively evaluated by the aged women-participants. In the context of Kazakhstani social environment that is viewed as challenging one, the social norm to take care of the family members and others around is not opposed. Rather the participants praise and are praised for the commitment to the caregiving and show some condemnation to any deviations from this pattern. As the example of former, Diana says that her son-in-law noted that his son (Diana's grandson) "is lucky to have such grandmother [as me]", compared to some other grandmothers who leave their small grandchildren home alone in order to visit some celebrations of the relatives or to commit some beauty practices in beauty salons. As the case of latter, Gul'nur treats the actions of one her acquaintance as wrong because she prioritizes herself for spending money and time whereas her family members are in need for some help. Gul'nur compares this to her own attitude to think about others in the first place instead of herself. The following passage about this Kazakh aged woman was said in a judgmental tone as if this woman is being selfish:

**Gul'nur:** For example, when I received first retirement compensation I made a major overhaul [in the apartment] [...]. [Concerning her] she bought a fur coat [for herself] [...] She also has two daughters – older one is married and she (this aged woman-acquaintance) says: "I don't buy her anything, she has her own husband for this purpose". [...] Even when her younger daughter caught a cold, she bought her cheap faux fur coat that is not warm at all. But she buys everything to herself. [Also], after work she comes and sleeps in the evening hours, [only] at 7-8 pm starts cooking dinner.

In Gul'nur's opinion it would be better if this woman did something meaningful instead of sleeping or spending time with pleasure, such as helped her forty-year-old son to

marry someone (in terms of helping financially with wedding), and bought warm clothes to her daughters instead of enjoying some purchases for herself. In the part of the interview relating to this discussion, Gul'nur demonstrates that the wellbeing of her family is more important than her own comfort and pleasures. Yet, later she admits that ideally there should be a balance between time and efforts spend for others and for her. Still, the participant assesses negatively another aged woman because of the way she spends her free time and money with a view to impose social sanctions on the inappropriate behaviour and distinguish herself as a woman who obeys the social norm, which is positively evaluated.

Compared to the imagined wrong way of spending money for aged women whose children are in need, Gul'nur herself tries to support her children as much as possible. Sometimes financial and emotional support go together and when her younger daughter had divorced and returned to parental home with a child, Gul'nur's mission was to care for them:

**Gul'nur:** I cared for daughter as for sick. Tried to support her, [stop her] from crying, from worrying. She didn't work and I led her where mink furs are sold. It was three years ago – four hundred thousand tenge – it was quite expensive. [She said:] “mom, it's not necessary, mom...”, she felt uncomfortable, but I said: it's ok, as long as I'm alive – I will buy (*poka ya zhiva – kupim*).

In terms of everything related to money, many of the research participants while discussing their economic situation immediately made a connection to their families again stressing the “giving” aspect. Even though for some of the women financial support of the children and grandchildren is not affordable, they represent a desire to help with money or to gift some gifts. These are some of the participants' answers regarding the self-assessed economic situation:

**Lidiya:** I am satisfied with pension. It's ok. [...] And we try to help children when they need [...]. Now I am preparing the parcels with gifts, I will send it [to children living abroad]. Of course to little granddaughter something. We are trying.

**Lena:** Well... of course it is enough but only for bare essentials. [...] Before, when I gave private lessons, I could give my grandchildren nice

presents but now when I live only on pension... I just pity, they got accustomed that grandmother indulges them. Now I indulge them but rarely.

Despite polarized self-assessed financial situation both women's thinking about money is inseparable from thinking about their family members and the ways to make them happy.

Likewise, the comfort and happiness of family members is one the motives for the research participants to take the responsibility for housekeeping. Many of the aged women in the study stress the themes of free from work time and the desire to provide perfect conditions for their families in order to compensate difficulties of the outside world. For instance, creating comfortable conditions for working family members is reason for being heavily involved in housekeeping activities for Gul'nur. This theme emerged in the discussion on what she usually does on her free time. Among the caregiving that is embodied in the grandmothering – she brings her granddaughter to school and other educational and sport activities almost every day – and taking care of her old mother, Gul'nur fulfils various housekeeping practices:

**Gul'nur:** [...] housekeeping, shopping is generally on me, I am cooking because daughter works all the day...cleaning is on me, and I can wash the floors...I take pity on (*mne zhalko*) my daughter, especially when it is freezing outside I want her to come home when everything is prepared and clean.

The participant raises the theme of compassion towards her adult working daughter. As well as other participants mention, they want to compensate some hardships of the outside from home world such as unpredictable weather conditions, frantic paces, and junk food that has impact on health with a valuable contribution into the private domain.

These intentions would be impossible if the women continued to be involved in the labour market because of the issue of time. While a working woman usually has less time to do housekeeping activities thoroughly, and can, for example, complete cleaning without

perfect result, the aged woman on retirement view that they can save the situation and provide high quality of food, order, and etc. For example, the following excerpt emphasizes well-being of a family as the reason for spending so much time and efforts for household chores:

**Diana:** [Now when I am retired] I want to do it better, properly, carefully - not like in times when I worked - like to do at least something (*aby kak sdelat', lish' by chto-to bylo*). [Now I think] it is necessary to clean here, dust there, because grandson is breathing this - it's bad for his lungs, he had pneumonia. To iron this, to disinfect this. I wash the dishes more carefully because these modern cleaning products remain on the dishes. [...] I do not do it for myself, I do it for the sake of children - so it has to be done properly.

Interestingly, Diana concludes that she puts such efforts for her family members while, perhaps, she would not do this that thoroughly for herself. The same with Anna, when her family members are busy at work the happiness of her family is the reason why she often tries to cook new things, even though she does not enjoy housekeeping activities:

**Anna:** I always want to cook something new and delicious to satisfy my family member (*chtoby dovol'ny byli*).

Similarly, grandmothering is a social expectation for some women that they meet in order to provide their grandchildren with constant normative (“one always has to help a child”) care while other parties that are also responsible for this task cannot or do not contribute sufficiently. That is, when parents who are involved to a labor market and cannot dedicate all their time for their children or the state that does not provide appropriate child care or some other help for families with small children. Therefore some responsibility for a child falls on the shoulders of a grandmother who is officially free not to have a “proper” job, who is expected to be happy to spend her free time giving care for her grandchildren, or otherwise to be ashamed:

**Diana:** I would feel guilty (*muchila by sovest'*) if I didn't take care and help with my grandson while having the opportunity to help.

Although some research participants acknowledge some advantages of the state kindergartens or private preschool and school centers such as the importance of early socialization and education for grandchildren, they claim that these services are not suitable for their families because they do not work properly or due to money issues. Thus, one significant reason for grandmothering is that while parents have to work it is the aged women who save the failure of the state to provide accessible and affordable care for children.

There are cases where the aged women were invited by their children who lived in another city to move in with them because the grandchildren need care while their parents at work. Specifically, Zhanar who moved in with her daughter's family from Karaganda to Astana claims that none of her four grandchildren could get a place in a state kindergarten, and while two of them are already in school the woman says that they are in some queue for the kindergarten but "it is still not our turn". Moreover, they cannot afford private nursery or preschool centers which are expensive for the family, and inflexible in terms of money and time: Zhanar was denied when asked a permission to pay only for the months when the granddaughter will actually attend the center rather than the whole year. Zhanar's smallest grandson was only three months old at the time when data have been collected but his mother – Zhanar's daughter – already got back to work because "it is difficult" when only father earns money while the whole family live in one small apartment which they rent and at the same time save money to buy their own one. Fortunately, there is the grandmother who could leave work, her own apartment, hometown, friends and relatives in order to move in with her daughter's family and to be involved with the caregiving for her grandchildren:

**Zhanar:** At the beginning it was difficult to get used to a different city...now it's ok. [...] They [daughter and son-in-law] worked, what would they do? Would they hire a babysitter? Babysitter, you know, you never know what can happen...(kakaya popadetsya)

Thus, the reasons why some aged women actively fulfill the role of a grandmother are that other services for children are unavailable (state kindergarten), expensive and inflexible (private centers), and/or can be unsafe (some babysitters).

Furthermore, it is true for Zhanar and others that the grandmothering go beyond mere feeding and keeping the children clean. And although some institutional care centers also responsible for not only basic needs but for children's education as well, according to the views of the participants, retired grandmother is better for a grandchild because of the extent of the attention and time she can devote while the parents are busy at work. For instance, Diana who also moved from another city to Astana with a view to be involved to grandmothering self-defines her role as nanny-tutor (*nyan'ka-guverner*). This means that while her daughter who is a widow and single mother works hard to provide for her son, Diana takes full responsibility for almost all facets of the grandson's life, from caring for him as a babysitter to controlling his educational process:

**Diana:** I bring the child to school, pick him up from it, help him with the homework, and control him. Especially because he is a boy, if [I didn't do this] he would be happy not to do his homework. [...] I came (moved to Astana) to foster my grandson, look after and control him.

Besides the general caregiving for her family, Diana justifies her active involvement into the grandson's life noting that boys require more control in pursuing education. Nevertheless, the grandmothers of girls also claim they do the same work in terms of fostering and educating their granddaughters. Indeed, regardless the grandchildren's gender, many research participants prioritize grandchildren's education as the crucial reason for grandmothering which include help in their studies. Such view ranges from women's actual tutoring and help with homework to creating necessary conditions with a view to facilitate educational process of a grandchild.

Therefore, some of the research participants acknowledge their contribution as educators to the success of their grandchildren. For example, Anna presents herself as the one who taught and helped with school issues her grandson because she has sufficient time and knowledge for it. She is educated and worked in a high position, and when she retired she took a responsibility for a grandson's education who at that time became a first-grade student. Nowadays when he is near to graduate school as an A-student Anna says he is grateful to her and her assistance without what it would be difficult to study well because of the inefficient school system where "there are forty students in a class, [...] and one teacher for all". Thus, the grandmother who had sufficient knowledge and time for helping her grandchild with studies individually views the grandmothing as saving the failure of a school to provide decent education to every student. While school teachers cannot pay much attention to students, all Anna's hopes and plans for future are focused on the grandson and his further education:

**Interviewer:** Do you have any plans for future?

**Anna:** Now all the plans are connected to the grandson because we have to graduate school with a distinction (*dostoino zakonchit' shkolu*) since we worked so hard all the past years...and to enter a university.

Anna even speaks about grandson's education using first personal plural pronoun "we" because it is their common aim and they both deserve the credit. However, such particular model where a grandmother is a participant of educational process of her grandchildren does not work for all aged woman in the study and unlike Anna many of the research participants play educational part more indirectly. For example, two participants who are former school teachers say that they do not teach their own grandchildren because of the lack of teacher-student relationships ("my granddaughters want me to play games with them rather than teaching" Lena), yet prioritizing education they devote a lot of time to activities that contribute to grandchildren's studying such as bringing them to school and to various

supplementary classes and creating comfortable conditions for studying process (controlling them, finding tutors, etc.).

Equally important that the research participants create the conditions for their grandchildren to spend time usefully and productively instead of wasting of time for activities that they view as unnecessary or even dangerous. For instance, they think that Internet or playing games on smartphones are useless and addictive activities that interfere their schooling, and can be even health-threatening: “children don’t read [books], spoil their vision”. In case of Aigul’, she and her husband live in a separate place, however even their apartment is organized for their seven grandchildren who often spend there their time: she emphasizes the importance of tidiness for small children, there are many toys and she highlights the ones for the development of the youngest grandson who is a toddler, she draws attention to the pictures of her grandchildren on the walls as well as some of their certificates and diplomas. Likewise, she stresses the importance of the grandchildren’s intellectual development and her part in it as she always tries to involve the grandchildren to some useful activities in their free time, motivate and encourage them to learn new things:

**Aigul’:** First of all, it is necessary for the children to study, to do something, so that they do not hang out without a work, and it is necessary more often to play games with them, so that the children will not be bored.

Moreover, some research participants involve their grandchildren to some activities with the help of their active participation such as playing chess, reading books, gardening in *ogorod* and so on, otherwise the grandchildren will be bored and compensate it with the undesirable for the grandmothers activities: “less free time they have, the better it is, because then they would not be smoking, drinking, and hanging around” (Aigul’) or “when they use their smartphones and tablets it is difficult to draw their attention, they have an absent look, it’s terrible” (Lena). In a similar manner, Aigul’ devotes her time to encourage the grandchildren to learn new things because she wants them to be multi-skilled and developed

in future. She illustrates this with the example of her grandson who one day told her about the desire to learn the sign language in order to help deaf-mute persons:

**Aigul'**: And I told him “let's learn together”. New things should be encouraged, [...] And I learned with him [...] This will not be bad for him, it is additional [knowledge], [...] and then when he will grow up, graduate from school, university, then will go to the army it will be advantageous for him.

Finally, along with the intention to develop grandchildren intellectually the research participants emphasize the moral development as significant part of the grandmothering. Grandmothers use the time they spend with their grandchildren to pass on moral values and wisdom, to share experience. They view it as an important mission because moral development is inseparable part of the upbringing. Generally, they explain what is good and what is bad, what are the rights and wrongs. Some stress the importance of lofty ideals, honesty and hard work, at the same time warning about a danger of the bad habits and idleness. Others prioritize such qualities as persistence, stamina because these will help the grandchildren in future to overcome any obstacles: “as *Van'ka-vstan'ka* – he is hit, but he won't fall down” (Diana). Moreover, this aspect of grandmothering can be pleasant when the research participants see that it is fruitful:

**Lena**: She (granddaughter) asks me questions and we discuss many themes including morality [...]. This is very-very important for me. And I sometimes feel my influence in her actions in terms of the aspects she received from me.

Similarly, due to the fact that active grandmothering involves spending a lot of time together, often the grandmothers develop their grandchildren morally by showing their own example, and encouraging following it. For instance, Aigul' positively assesses when people are neat, tidy, and she teaches her grandchildren to be always clean, nice-looking and well-dressed while she always follows this attitude herself. Or Diana who does not like cooking but do it every day emphasizes for her grandson the importance of doing things that one has to do first, and only then doing what one wants to do repeating him the wisdom such as “the

greatest battle you ever have to win is the battle within yourself". The research participants claim they also speak a lot with their grandchildren, so grandmothers often satisfy grandchildren's desire to ask questions and at the same time they pass on their experience and wisdom.

Interestingly, some research participants label the moral values they adhere and pass on to their grandchildren as specifically Soviet or traditional Kazakh ones, so it seems that they feel a responsibility as the only persons in their families who can pass them on (both women are single). For example, Lena defines Soviet values as highly moral values that were common for people in the Soviet era but nowadays perceived as outdated and even negative because of its inflexibility: "too much honest, too much of a kind, too much idealistic". Still, she is glad that she is an example of these values for her granddaughters. Conversely, Zhanar presents traditional Kazakh values as the ones that are praised for children and she is proud that other people note her grandchildren as well educated (*vospitanny*) because of her influence. She relates Kazakh values to the traditions that include showing respect for those who older such as give them seats and priority to try food first, to behave modestly and politely, to say "thank you" and "please". Moreover, Zhanar is a kind of a grandmother who speaks more Kazakh and scolds her grandchildren when they speak Russian at home.

Finally, the idea of reciprocity as a social mechanism when parents help children with the view to receive support if/when they will not be able to take care of themselves is not highlighted much, even though nursing home care and retirement homes remain inappropriate option for the aged and it is family members who are expected to look after ill parents. While many of the aged participants took or take care of their old parents, during the interview when we addressed the topic of reciprocity the participants stressed altruistic intentions of their caregiving towards adult children and grandchildren:

**Diana:** I do not expect anything... Well, if only they have the opportunity, they will take care of me when I will become senile (laughs), will serve me a glass of water.

### Caregiving as anti-ageing

By means of talking about caregiving practices the aged women in this study are active participants in anti-ageing discourse production. They emphasize that they continue being active, giving, rather than taking, staying independent and needed, and doing meaningful and useful activities, even though most of them are retired. Some research participants stress that they are active and “have no a minute” because of caregiving practices. These aspects are positively evaluated in later life and allow denying ageist notion of oldness with all the stereotypes about this life stage. The research participants understand caregiving as opposite to care-receiving and dependency associated with old age. In the following excerpt the participant views a practice of caregiving as a strategy to stay active and to “fight” negative consequences of ageing (according to the discourse that ageing is equal to inevitable decline):

**Aigul’:** I keep tidiness here myself, otherwise I would sit here and occupy the half of this sofa. So the moving is crucial, the moving is life... [...] because if I just sit in this age and watch TV, my life will end, the joints will hurt and so on.  
[...] This all depends on a person...

The research participant represents her cleaning activities as beneficial for her because it allows her staying active rather than becoming idle. In turn, she believes continuity and activeness will help to control or manage her ageing body. The women views her choice to do regular caregiving practices as keeping her agile, therefore preventing from overweight and other body changes that, it is believed, come with ageing. By emphasizing that this choice is “primarily depends on a person” Aigul’ enters the anti-ageing discourses that everyone is responsible for postponing old age or for the quality of their ageing.

In terms of mental well-being, Anna treats grandmothering as “constant brain’s development” because while helping her grandson to study, she keeps her own mental processes active and focused:

**Anna:** I always think about something. [...] When he is assigned extra class reading in summer holidays I read and reread all the books with him. It is important in order to avoid stagnation in one’s thoughts (*eto zhe vazhno choty ne bylo zastoya v myslyakh*). So I think it is good and even necessary for me [...] in order to make my brain work.

In the same way most of the participants construe the caregiving practices as something that gives meaning to their lives compared to aged men who often lose the purpose with the retirement. In terms of men, the common statement made by the participants is that aged men must have a hobby in order to have a purpose in life. The participants’ logic is that to age positively or avoid becoming old as much as possible one has to stay active, do something meaningful, remain needed and give rather than take but the women believe that men who are retired usually lose the reason to be active and to be needed – work, in a sense of the involvement to the labour market.

**Nadezhda:** (about herself and sisters) all our husbands died. All husbands, they do not want... they lie on a sofa and then die early. And we don’t die early - we are moving.

There is an acceptance of the broader discourse that ageing can be controlled and one should be responsible for this control. The pattern is that the women agree that “movement is life” so the women see the caregiving practices - in a sense like some hobby for men - as the way to postpone oldness and even death because they stay active.

Moreover, the research participants perceive caregiving practices as meaningful activity that give sense of contributing which helped to make the transition from work to retirement easier. Compared to men who, participants believe, do not know what to do in the emerged free from work time which cause depression, indifference and even drinking habits:

**Raushan:** They gather, drink alcohol, play dominoes somewhere, someone can go fishing... In general, I just note they don't know what to do.

If the women often are the primary caregivers in terms of housekeeping no matter if they are in a work force or if they are retired, it is interesting to look on the relationships between the two themes in the participants' accounts - caregiving and work/retirement issue. For example, it does not always mean that women perceive work as less important and are easily retired when the official time comes. Many of them argue that while working they were balancing between the public and private domains because in the time of their youth and middle-ages the hard work and one's contribution to the broader society were praised for women as well as for men and emphasize the necessity to earn money for all members of household. Only three out of ten women retired at official age of retirement (58 years old), others continued to work for some time or found part-time job. At the same time, for the women in this study the retirement was not a traumatic experience due to the enhanced commitment for the caregiving they began. Here is the excerpt demonstrating the perception of the place of the caregiving on the retirement experience by Lidiya who retired at the age of 64 instead of 58:

Basically, it was unexpected, I did not plan [to retire], and I thought I would work for another year ...Yet somehow I quickly got into a rut [...]. At home, too, there is always enough work, [...] I can say that the household chores were sick - cooking, washing, and cleaning, I took it all on myself, because the daughter-in-law was still studying at that time, the son worked. So I got accustomed to the retirement quickly. Then the granddaughter was born, concerns increased. I did not regret that I left work, in fact.

The woman perceives household chores as work that helped her to leave behind the thoughts about her previous work place. Although she explains that one of the reasons to remain working was the material support for the youngest son who was studying at university,

due to caregiving for her son she did not experience longing for work apart from longing for colleagues when she eventually retired.

While the women view caregiving practices as a suitable way to postpone oldness, some act in accordance with discourses of biopolitics and biomedicine and vice versa try to postpone oldness in order to continue caregiving as much as possible. For example, Gul'nur goes to the gym because she "is not allowed to get old" and must continue supporting her family and especially the granddaughter who is in the second grade of school and requires constant care. The participant distinguishes herself from old people because she is "moving actively, and helping others".

In terms of grandmothering, while the research participants represent active participation in their grandchildren's lives as mostly the act of "giving" such as caring, facilitating education, passing on moral values, it is also important what they think they gain from the grandmothering. Some of the aged women view grandmothering as anti-ageing activity because it gives them meaning in life and is a strategy for supporting their physical and mental well-being by staying active. Regarding the grandmothering as meaningful practices they assume that everyone has to have a purpose, incentive (*"stimul"*) for life. Otherwise, they believe, people in their age are easily falling into the negative "old" category. In order to avoid "bad" oldness the research participants believe one should have meaning in life, do meaningful activities that include contributing, being helpful and needed, and, interestingly, to give love and positive. While they are no longer contributing to society by means of an involvement to a labor market, they compensate the feeling of being helpful by grandmothering: as Diana says about caregiving for her grandson that "since due to the circumstances (*raz uzh u mneya tak slozhilos'*) I don't participate in social life, then I'm participating in his life". Love for participants' grandchildren and family members also gives meaning to their life:

**Interviewer:** Why is generally grandmothering important?

**Lidiya:** [...] it is important for everyone when there is an incentive in life (*chtoby v zhizni byl kakoi-to stimul*). And for me such incentive is to love my children and grandchildren and help them.

## Chapter 5. Discussion of analyzed data

As ageing is accompanied with a variety of meanings in society, the main aim of the thesis was to understand how Kazakhstani aged women construct ageing, old age, their age identifications as well as gender roles. The study addressed the questions of what is the experience of ageing and its construction; how aged women in Kazakhstan relate to the dominant societal discourses about ageing, old age and gender; and what discursive strategies they employ to negotiate ageing and gender roles and identities as aged women.

This study revealed multiple and contradicting discourses that influence construction of ageing and are reproduced by aged women-participants in different contexts of talking. First, it is discourses of ageism that “other” aged people ascribing usually negative images that allegedly accompany ageing. Second, anti-ageing discourses that are reinforced by biopolitics, neoliberal values, consumerist ideology emphasize everyone’s responsibility to improve the quality of ageing and to postpone negative oldness by means of promoting healthy lifestyle, continuity of “normal” life or additional strategies. Third, the dictate of socio-cultural ideals plays an important role in defining the limits and opportunities of women who are in their “later” stage of life.

Yet, I argue that the research participants deal with these discourses successfully. Chapter 1 addresses the ways Kazakhstani aged women make and perform ageing experiences and presents the findings in linear fashion, even though it is very complex, inconsistent process that depends on contexts, multiple perspectives and broader discourses. Discourses of ageism imply inevitable degradation for everyone as they age. Yet, the aged women employ the strategies that allow them not to contest ageism *per se* but simultaneously disavow themselves from it. Such strategy allows the participants to save dignity, to show their control over lives, ageing, or particular moment of interaction. For example, they can deny their age-identity to be old because they do not fit the stereotypes, but still do not contest the

stereotypes because they believe other people of their age or older fit them, whereas they are the exceptions to the rule. Or they can accept label “elderly” and talk about inevitability of old age because of their deteriorated health, or alleged signs of old age. For example, talking about possible senile dementia, joking about own age, emphasizing age can be the demonstration of control over self-identification in the face of ageism. Moreover, they reproduce ageist stereotype that old age *per se* is a disease because they associate health problems primarily with it, but later can admit that the problems began since middle-ages or as a consequence of an accident.

At the same time with an emphasis on health they later can prioritize “young soul” or the endeavor to postpone “real old age” by staying positive or active. Compared to negative stereotypes about being old, the emphasis on their will to retain "positive" traits brings us to the significance of anti-ageing discourses. The research participants negotiate anti-ageing when talk about the ways old age should be “fought” by emphasizing continuity of “normal” life of a woman who is not old. For example, the participants support normative anti-ageing dictate when speak about the necessity to continue staying positive or at least to represent herself as positive to others compared to old ones who, they believe, complain too much; to maintain positive image by means of beauty practices; to consume anti-ageing products, and even to put more efforts to maintain flawless appearance because of the “double demand” being women and being aged.

Nevertheless, the analysis would be insufficient without the acknowledgement for the dictate of socio-cultural ideals which is the third dominant discourse reproduced by Kazakhstani aged women. Although, the research participants could insist on continuity initially, when they shift age-identity to understanding it as later stage of life, they reassess the extent of the continuity and its limits. Any of their attempts to negotiate anti-ageing acquire sensitivity to culture. To illustrate, they are socially praised for the fact of dancing,

but would be sanctioned for “excessive shake dance as before” (“*kak ran’she sheik chereschur my ne delaem*”). They can assure that without makeup they will not go out anywhere, but later insist on the makeup that must not be very bright because of the age limits. They emphasize optimism and positive attitude to life, but agree to hide inappropriately excessive expression of positive emotions such as laugh. They are neither allowed to stop staying active, nor they are allowed to be too much active. They are neither allowed to get old because it means to “quit” to old age that is associated with miserable images, nor are they allowed to stay young because sociocultural expectations would impose the moral stigma for any attempt to “get one's youth back” (*molodit’sya*) that means inability to accept ageing with dignity.

Even though Kazakhstani aged women should think about their dignity in many cases, the women in the study can primarily take advantageous position in face of confusion around social ageing due to unstable age-identities. The Kazakhstani aged women contextually shift age-identity making ageing and old age by means of negotiation, discursive interpretation, and reproduction of dominant discourses. This strategy gives them the room to choose what discourse to negotiate in every context. For instance, they can fight with overweight because it is socially praised to continue performing femininity, but they also can liberate themselves from participating in this “battle area” because of their age and cultural normalization of gaining weight with age.

**Table 2. Categories and themes drawn from interviews on meaning of ageing, old age, and age-identity**

<b>CATEGORIES</b>	<b>THEMES</b>
<b>DISCOURSES OF AGEISM</b>	“Othering”: negative stereotypes about old age, ageing
	“Othering”: stereotypes about old age, ageing
	Distinguishing oneself from those who old
	Accepting old-identity because of inevitable bodily decline (Alzheimer disease, etc.)
<b>ANTI-AGEING</b>	Prioritizing self-representation rather than deteriorated health
	Stressing one’s responsibility to “fight” old age
	It is unpleasant to “quit” old age

	Continuity (forever young soul, “I am the same”) Normative continuity (must do)
<b>GENDER BASED ANTI-AGEING</b>	Caregiving rather than care-reeving Continuing performing femininity, beauty practices, dressing Applying even more efforts to perform femininity, beauty practices, dressing
<b>AGE BASED SOCIOCULTURAL EXPECTATIONS</b>	Ageing must be accepted Changing, limiting behaviour and previous way of life Moral example for everyone
<b>AGE AND GENDER BASED SOCIOCULTURAL EXPECTATIONS</b>	Pursuit of youthfulness is unpleasant ( <i>molodit'sya</i> ) Bodily changes should be accepted Caregiving is more important than beauty Grandmothering as a role Moral example for everyone even more than men

Moreover, I think it is important to pay attention to the ways of negotiating caregiving practices and caregiver identity as the core theme for Kazakhstani aged women because it reconciles, is shaped by, and allows reproducing all the discourses about ageing without danger to be socially sanctioned. The Chapter 3 disentangles caregiving as an important part of women’s ageing experience in Kazakhstan and its negotiation and points to the complexity of its discursive interpretation. In particular, the importance of caregiving is in cultural expectations with regard to gender and age. Generally, the research participants fulfilled and fulfill the care-work such as household chores, child-rearing, and emotional support because they believe that women are essentially better in these activities than men regardless of their age, work status, and whether they enjoy this or not. The participants internalized the division to the private and public domains where women should normally be good at homemaking and be family oriented, even though most of the participants are educated and were involved in the labour market in the Soviet and post-Soviet times successfully balancing both realms. While cultural expectations based on older age dictate a woman to change way of life and, speaking with words of the research participants, “to behave according to the age”, it is not about caregiving. Caregiving remains the activity that fits later life course

expectations for Kazakhstani women as anything else, whereas active grandmothering can become a role that is also expected in later life. While caregiving is mostly related to the importance of a family where family members live together with or near to the aged women, some women pointed out caregiving for neighbours, other relatives, friends, and former colleagues even if it is in form of phone talk or giving advice. Influenced by this cultural, rather than natural expectation, Kazakhstani aged women take chores for granted, emphasize their desire to fulfill the role of a grandmother.

They also assess negatively those counterparts who prioritize self-interests over the interests of a family and household. The study participants support the collectivism ideals where one is expected to help to those in need if one can help or with anything that one can help. When a care for fellow people is a social norm, it is not contested by the research participants, rather followed. Kazakhstani aged women name problems and insecurities of broader Kazakhstani society such as economic situation, unemployment, inadequate work of child care institutions. In turn, as grandmothers, mothers, fellow women who are free from employment, they think that they have to take some responsibility for solving or compensating these problems. Yet, they do it by means of caregiving rather than some political activism, as it might take place in other sociocultural context. Thus, again the aged women take obligation to help to their family members and others who might need their help. And caregiving practices in private domain seem fitting well under the umbrella of this social norm.

Eventually, caregiving is useful for negotiating anti-ageing discourses on the individual's responsibility to "fight" with ageing because of its significant "giving" part that includes activeness, meaningful, useful and fruitful practices. For instance, cleaning and cooking give immediate results, whereas passing moral values, which are believed an aged woman has to essentially follow, to the grandchildren may give the results in a long-term perspective. Also,

caregiving is constructed in the face of dictate of one's agency over their lives, and activeness that allegedly is crucial in "fighting" with ageing. On the one hand, the belief that one is responsible for managing their bodies is supported and fulfilled by the research participants with a view to continue caregiving which is, as already noted, deemed important and natural for aged women. For example, the women emphasized that they go to the gym or do exercises because it will help them to stay active longer with a view to help their family longer. On the other hand, caregiving is an instrument of biopolitics promoting anti-ageing for the sake of postponing old age. Paradoxically, in case of Kazakhstani aged women, the pressure on performing self-care is implemented by taking care of others. The logic is that the aged women find advantages for themselves in caregiving practices because it implies moving and staying active, which, in turn, will help them to stay fit, healthy, independent, and, therefore, not old.

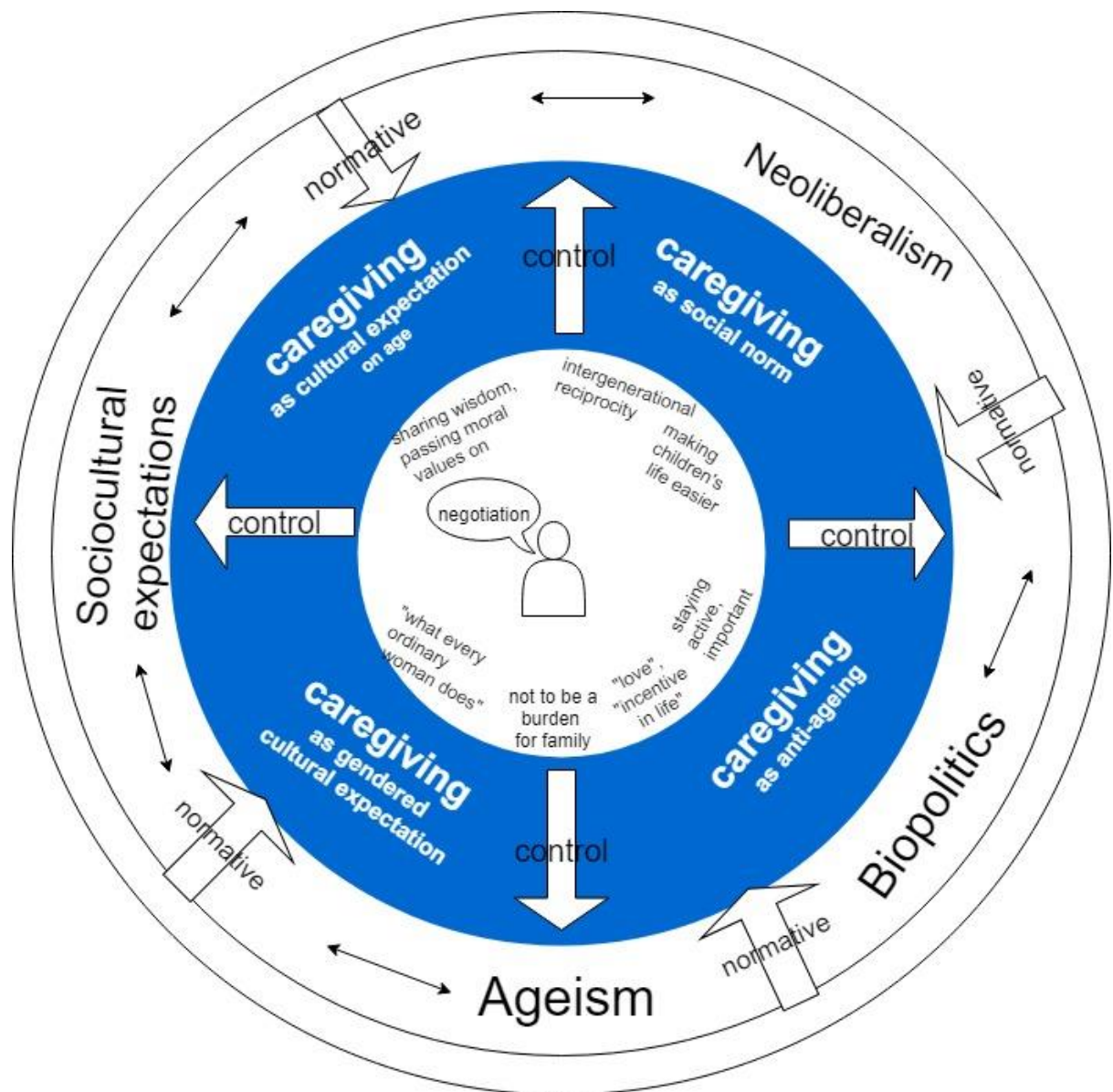
**Table 3. Categories and themes drawn from interviews on caregiving**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>THEMES</b>
<b>CAREGIVING AS SOCIOCULTURAL EXPECTATION FOR WOMEN</b>	everyday caregiving: cooking, cleaning, grandmothering (bring a child to school, control schooling, etc.)
	teaching gender-based values and practices (for granddaughters)
	supporting harmony in family
<b>CAREGIVING AS SOCIOCULTURAL EXPECTATION FOR AGED WOMEN</b>	more important than beauty
	passing wisdom, experience, moral values
	grandmothering is a joy of later life, love, affection
<b>CAREGIVING AS SOCIAL NORM</b>	helping, making others' lives easier
	saving the failure of state to provide a child care

	compensating the failure of state to provide stability
	intergenerational support
<b>CAREGIVING AS ANTI-AGEING</b>	continuing to be needed
	continuing to do meaningful, fruitful practices
	staying active physically
<b>CAREGIVING AS AGEISM</b>	distinguishing from old ones who are a burden for their families

While it was a challenge to present the discursive construction of age-identities, gender and societal discourses that shape and are shaped making ageing in linear fashion, I present fluid relationships between the themes in the Diagram 1. One can interpret the diagram starting from the center of the circle or from the bigger one because societal discourses and the research participants' discursive strategies of self-representation and representation of others work both ways and interconnected. The outer circle that illustrates societal discourses is by no means fixed, rather it is in constant motion because ageism, sociocultural expectations, biopolitics, neoliberal values are permeating the whole experience of the aged women in Kazakhstan. In turn, the aged women do not oppose the dominant discourses but create a strategy to retain a sense of control over their ageing and its representation. The strategy is caregiving practices and its negotiation that make sense the contradictions between the discourses and represent the research participants as those who retain control over their lives.

**Diagram 1. Multidimensional negotiating of caregiving as a response to various discourses about ageing**



## **Conclusion**

As life expectancy increased significantly due to the achievements of medicine as well as other causes, the social meaning of ageing has changed. Nevertheless, ageism toward growing old as well as old people is still pervasive. This study contributes to the body of literature that aimed to deconstruct the stereotypes about old age because it presents age women as not others but as ordinary people who are open to global discourses rather than isolated; who might use Internet, social media with a view to receive information, be aware of the trends; who love and emphasize the importance of sharing and receiving love at least from their families; who might forget things and might sometimes allow themselves to be lazy; who contribute, even if they might think otherwise or if the dictate that aged people must continue to contribute is a construct too. Remarkably, they are not others even in the way they construct ageism toward old age.

Moreover, this thesis contributes to the literature that emphasizes the importance of sociocultural environment when study ageing. the transformed social meaning of ageing and old age is also influenced by the emergence of anti-ageing discourses that influence the experiences of old people in Western societies. Yet, today urban aged women in Kazakhstan also demonstrated the awareness and even support for prioritizing personal responsibility in postponing “bad” old age as much as possible. However, they do not change themselves much with a view to meet the requirements of anti-ageing ideals. Rather, they remain qualitatively different from Western anti-ageing expectations because of the respect for and constraints of the sociocultural environment they live in.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to the body of literature on caregiving because it points to the importance of aged women as caregivers and complexity of caregiving practices and its negotiation in general. It is not sufficient to address caregiving as only a part of culture, or everyday activities that aged women fulfil, it is also exploited by women in the

discursive construction of the complex ageing experience. Moreover, by means of presenting aged women as caregivers, this thesis deconstructs the assumption that aged women stop being active and do not contribute to the broader society since they are no longer officially employed. First, such stereotypes rest upon the questionable assumption that there is a distinction between “real” work, which is usually waged, and invisible unpaid labour such as housework or caring for family members, which is usually women’s work. But also it is significantly related to the age of women, their status as retired, and, again, ageist and miserable stereotypical images about aged people.

This study also points for future research on aged women that will draw more attention to the research participants who are older (70+) because it is first and foremost different cohort, which is significant determinant in studies on social ageing. Also, the research that will consider the experiences of women from rural areas and from places that are more traditional, as well as ethnic diversity even within Kazakhstan or broader Central Asia. Also, the emphasis on the economic situation of the research participants from diverse socioeconomic background should be made because I believe the results might differ considerably when one experiences a serious lack of money.

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### ***ETHICS Protocol for the study***

#### **1. PARTICIPANTS, DATA**

(a) The sample size for interviews is ten (10) women of age of 59-69 who have been recently retired (about 1 to 10 years ago), as well as those have been self-employed or housewives. Eligibility criteria also include the place of residence: Astana, Karaganda (Kazakhstan). Heterogeneity of participants' ethnicity will be also considered. There are no other specific eligibility criteria.

(b) Interview will be recorded for further data analysis. However, confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter. Researcher is responsible for providing security of all gathered data.

(c) There is no group or individual-level vulnerability related to the research that needs to be mitigated. There will not be difficulties in understanding informed consent, because it will be provided in language that is convenient for the participant (Russian or Kazakh), printed with large font, and all the necessary procedures will be conducted to ensure that all the points of the consent are clear.

#### **2. RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS**

Participants for the research will be recruited in a variety of ways. First, the researcher will approach people in my neighborhood, local mini bazaars, public transportations explaining the description of the research and its purposes, eligible criteria for it, and invitation to participate. Second, the recruitment will be provided by the snowballing sampling strategies.

#### **3. COMPENSATION**

(a) Will participants receive compensation for participation?

Financial	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
In-kind	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

(b) Compensation is not possible because of the lack of funding for the research, and not appropriate because it is a part of master's thesis project.

#### **4. POSSIBLE RISKS**

(a) Please indicate all potential risks to participants as individuals or as members of a community that may arise from this research:

(i) Physical risks (e.g., any bodily contact or administration of any substance): Yes  No

(ii) Psychological/emotional risks (e.g., feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, or upset):  
Yes  No

(iii) Social risks (e.g., loss of status, privacy and/or reputation): Yes  No

(iv) Legal risks (e.g., apprehension or arrest, subpoena):  
Yes  No

(b) There are possible emotional risks during the interviews because the discussion will include sensitive for women in Kazakhstani society topics regarding their ageing, the perception of body transformations, some experience, as well as the topic on family, marital status, et cetera, so there are some possibilities that questions may provoke uncomfortable feelings, embarrassment, anxiety or sadness. However, these risks will be minimized by the interviewer and should be no more than a minimal. If participant considers the question as inappropriate it will be skipped.

## 5. POSSIBLE BENEFITS

- There are no direct anticipated benefits to participants from their involvement in the project, however they may find it gratifying to have an opportunity to share their views and experiences on their ageing
- Participation in the study benefit to the society because it is valuable scientific contribution in the area of social gerontology, and to Kazakhstani society in particular because it is the first step to understand in-depth women's experience of ageing there.

## 6. CONSENT PROCESS

(a) Researcher will provide the participants with all required information about purposes and approaches of inquiry, protection of personal data, voluntary nature of participation and opportunity of withdrawal in any time they wish to. Participants will also have written consent form with study purposes and procedures and they will sign it after ensuring that all the necessary information is comprehensible, and they agree to participate in a study voluntarily.

## 7. PARTICIPANT WITHDRAWAL

(a) Participants will be informed about their right to withdraw from the research during verbal explanation of their rights and in the written consent form. It is sufficient for participant to tell that they are not going to participate in the project any more. No further explanations of reasons for refusing to take part in the research need.

(b) All the participant's data that have been already gathered will be destroyed immediately. Withdrawal will not result any consequences on the participant.

## 8. CONFIDENTIALITY

(a) Will the data be treated as confidential?      Yes       No

(b) Data that will be collected from the interviews will be kept private in researcher's personal password-protected computer and cloud storage in case of system fails. It will not be shared with or given to anyone.

(c) The personality of interviewees will be kept as confidential information. All the names will be changed.

## 9. DATA SECURITY, RETENTION AND ACCESS

(a) Data (including written records and audio records) will be protected by password-protected software during the conduct of the study and dissemination of results.

(b) Data will be retained during conduct of the study, data analysis and dissemination of results (about 1 year).

(c) Data will not have archival value.

# The example of the mind map used for data interpretation

Created in *Coggle* - mind mapping service by Google

