‘Doing Family’ in Kazakhstan: How Do Newlyweds’ Residence Patterns Affect Women’s Agency in Marriage?

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with 32 urban, middle-class Kazakh women from Astana and Almaty, I examine how residence patterns influence women's agency in marriage. Depending on where newlyweds live in relation to their parents or extended family, different types of bonds and relational commitments are fostered (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018). Each arrangement influences women's agency in marriage by determining the level of involvement with extended kin, the expectations of caregiving, and the extent of autonomy within the household. By integrating theories of bricolage (Duncan and Carter 2022) with the concept of 'doing family' (Morgan, 2019), I highlight how family life is constructed and negotiated through a range of everyday practices and relational dynamics. Women's narratives illuminate the complex interplay of emotions, rational decision-making, and traditional practices – all merge into how contemporary urban newlyweds 'do' family. This interplay reflects the complex negotiations involved in maintaining familial roles, adjusting to residence patterns, and shaping women's agency within their marriages. While patrilocal co-residence reflects traditional norms, this arrangement is also strategically adapted by contemporary couples. Many informants described how the period of co-residence is utilized not only to honor familial obligations but also as a practical strategy for accumulating savings for future autonomy, thereby transforming a practice rooted in tradition into a resourceful approach to modern financial realities. This adaptation demonstrates how women, and their families blend tradition with pragmatic considerations to navigate the complexities of marital life. Patrilocal co-residence remains a central focus - highlighting a resilient feature of Kazakh society's patrilineal organization – this study extends to examine a wider range of residence patterns and their implications.

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Dedication

To my loyal and loving companion, Aqtos (2012-2024), whose friendship brought me comfort and joy throughout this journey.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Chapter I. Introduction

1.1. *Marriage, Tradition, and Modernity in Kazakhstan: Setting the Stage*

Family studies often portray family as a place of solidarity, love, compassion, order, and relational commitments. While these studies present family as a well-defined notion entailing a form or institution to which individuals belong, it is imperative to invoke new realities of family experiences through directing attention to the '*doing*'[1] of family as an activity. As David Hopcraft John Morgan, a British sociologist emphasized in his book *Rethinking Family Practices* (2011), families are created by their members by means of acting upon sets of everyday practices, emphasizing that 'family' is a verb rather than a noun. The act of 'doing' refers to everyday actions and practices such as caregiving, developing cooperative arrangements, navigation of relational responsibilities, or simply spending time together, through which individuals create and maintain familial relationships. Furthermore, people 'do' families by engaging in practices that are informed by traditions but are also adapted to individual circumstances (Akiner 1997; Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian 2015).

The act of doing family forms a *bricolage*[2] of tradition, where family members selectively draw from traditional practices, adapt, and modify them, discursively examine, and integrate new elements (Carter 2018, 114). The selective engagement with tradition allows individuals to honor cultural norms while asserting their personal agency, for instance, in managing relationships with extended family members, particularly in-laws, urban Kazakh women often engage in a bricolage of tradition. They tend to adhere to traditional expectations of duty and respect toward in-laws yet negotiate the extent of their involvement in day-to-day decision-

[1] The concept of 'doing family' is developed by David Morgan and draws from the conceptualization of a family as entailing acts and practices of doing. According to Morgan (1999; 2019), 'family' is not a noun, but a verb. Morgan, D. (2019). Ideologies of marriage and family life. In *Marriage, domestic life and social change* (pp. 114-133). Routledge.

[2] A process of bricolage addresses how married couples 'do agency' to explain 'how re-traditionalized conformity emerges out of an individualized event', it can also be translated as 'do-it-yourself' – it can be inventive or impregnated with collective moralities, hidden and non-reflexive, rational or emotional (Carter and Duncan 2018, 181).

making to maintain a balance with the couples' privacy and reliance on kinship networks for emotional or financial support.

Marriage and family are performed differently. Likewise, as Julia Carter and Simon Duncan, British scholars in the fields of family studies and sociology highlight in their book *Reinventing Couples: Tradition, Agency and Bricolage* (2017), individuals' rationality is rarely unbound. Individual choices are relational and set within emotional and intimate relationships with partner and kin (Carter and Duncan 2017, 157). Contrary to individualization theories, the process of bricolage or 'as people do with what they have at hand' reveals how tradition, rationality, and emotions shape individual agency in marriage (Duncan 2011, 134). Reconciling 'tradition' with 'modern' and blending the 'individual' with 'the social' provides a better understanding of how individuals build their personal lives in relation to family members and perform their individual agencies (Carter and Duncan 2017, 180). For instance, when co-residence emerges as a potential arrangement, driven by relatives' expectations and cultural certainties or the financial constraints posed by high apartment prices that newlyweds rarely can afford, young couples typically reside with the husband's parents, situating them within the patrilocal family network.[3] This setup, which remains resilient in patrilineal societies, is usually perceived as restrictive, and frequently evokes a commonly recognized narrative of tensions between the bride and her in-laws, situating the bride within a hierarchical family structure, under the oversight of the husband's parents. The rhetoric also suggests young married women's 'low status' as an '…obedient and selfless slave that is also a family member' as highlighted by Diana Kudaibergenova (2018, 318) in her article *"Project "Kelin": Marriage, Women, and Re-Traditionalization in post-Soviet Kazakhstan"*. The overarching

[3] In patrilineal societies, newlyweds are generally expected to reside with the husband's relatives, with the bride integrating into his household to ensure the continuation of his lineage (Werner 2009).

generalizations do not reflect the difference between rhetoric and practice as if Kazakh *kelins* perform their social roles uniformly across different family systems and relational dynamics. Furthermore, the narrative around a subordinate *kelin* overlooks the ways in which newlyweds are integrated into the extended network of kinship relations, the negotiations around familial obligations and relational commitments, or how Kazakh newlyweds rely on kinship networks for both emotional and practical support – the cooperative and communal dimensions of family life in Kazakhstan. For instance, this research found that newlyweds often strategically utilize co-residence to gain support from their relatives and to save funds toward purchasing their own independent apartment. Moreover, women's positions in family system and the relationship dynamics with family members oftentimes depends on personalities involved, and women's own capacity and willingness to adapt to new circumstantial arrangements or constraints.

Moreover, although patrilocality is the customary or the default residence setup, urban newlyweds increasingly reshape this practice, resulting in the development of new family practices and varying residence arrangements. For instance, newlyweds' residence arrangements are rarely permanent, as they also may end up in uncommon residence setups such as matrilocal co-residence[4] or neolocal residence[5]. The framework of bricolage and the focus on the act of '*doing*' family reveal marriage and family as context-specific and adaptive, moving beyond simplified portrayals of relationships as purely positive or overwhelmingly complex. On contrary, this approach emphasizes the fluidity and individual agency involved in family life, reflecting a range of experiences that shape everyday interactions.

The enduring significance of kinship relations in Kazakhstan have adapted to changes brought about by independence, globalization, and individualization. Nevertheless, as Cynthia Werner, an American anthropologist emphasized in her article *'Household Networks and the*

[4] Matrilocal co-residence is referred to a living arrangement where newlyweds co-reside with the wife's parents or relatives.
[5] Neolocal residence is referred to a living setup where newlyweds live far from both sets of parents or relatives.

Security of Mutual Indebtedness in Rural Kazakhstan' (1977), the traditional structures of kinship ties and kinship solidarity remain strong in Kazakhstan and serve important functions such as cultural continuity, social support, economic cooperation – overall, decisions about marriage, residence patterns, and child-rearing often involve input from extended family members, reflecting the collective and cooperative nature of family life in Kazakhstan. Family and marriage practices in Kazakhstan are deeply intertwined with traditions – adherence to patrilineal norms, patrilocal co-residence, maintaining close relations with extended kin and ensuring continuity of family lineage, and the role and social category of *kelin*[6]. Traditional practices like patrilocal co-residence, or living with the husband's relatives, are framed within local discourses of continuity, societal expectations and patrilineality. Traditional roles such as that of *kelin* or daughter-in-law are embedded within the broader societal and familial expectations, which include notions of honour and shame (Werner 2009, 320-323; Thibault and Caron 2022). Nonetheless, women's narratives suggest a recurring pattern: informants acknowledge and reflect on traditional norms surrounding the expectations from *kelin* - in terms of her social role and behavior – yet these recognized cultural truths do not consistently translate into actual practices. Instead, women communicated their family practices and emotions by reflecting on their marital experiences and demonstrated a capacity to identify traditional practices and skillfully adapt, and even challenge them discursively during the interviews.

Likewise, this research investigates the nuanced ways in which individual agency unfolds within a volatile system of family relations. Examining how newlyweds navigate the intersection between kinship expectations and their personal values and aspirations is central

[6] Kelin in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, refers to a newly married woman who moves into her husband's family home. The role of kelin encompasses various duties such as household chores, cooking, and taking care of children. With changes in family practices, specifically in urban areas, kelin is not obliged to co-reside with husband's parents (Turaeva 2017).

to this inquiry. Within this framework, residence patterns[7] or proximity between a young couple and their respective kin emerge not merely as a structural factor but as a thematic context. Residence patterns serve as a basis to differentiate between couples, revealing how where newlyweds reside shapes the ways in which they navigate their marital roles and relational commitments with family members, and within their nuclear family. Furthermore, the emphasis on residence patterns inherently pays tribute to traditional norms of living arrangements, where patrilocality often serves as the expected default.

Residence is not static, and newlyweds sometimes find themselves in living arrangements that do not align with traditional expectations, which highlights diverse performances and adaptations of family practices within a patrilineal society. Traditional expectations and cultural truths do shape individuals' post-marital outcomes, but the ways in which women perform their social roles, reflect on their experiences and what meanings they assign to them vary significantly. Family practices provide a lens to understand persistence and adaptations of traditions among urban middle-class Kazakh newlyweds, as urban settings create spaces where traditional values are both challenged and maintained, reflecting both adherence to and deviation from established norms. It is nonetheless essential to highlight that, while I do acknowledge the patrilocal default and its common perception as 'traditional', my focus deliberately moves beyond the traditional-modern dichotomy and the expectations of an 'average outcome of various family systems'[8] – instead, this study emphasizes variations and divergent responses as central focus of the investigation.

[7] Residence patterns determine the extent of kinship obligations and a degree to how close the interaction between newlyweds and their relatives would be. In patrilineal societies, it is expected that newlyweds would end up in patrilocal settings, live near or with the husband's parents. There women tend to '…loose a degree of autonomy and independence when living with or near their in-laws' (Judd 1989 and Zhang 2009 in Gruijters 2019, 4-5). However, urban newlyweds tend to exhibit residential mobility, leading to the development of new family practices.

[8] Coontz, S. (2004). The world historical transformation of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 974-979.

This research explores contemporary family practices through narratives produced from interviews with 32 heterosexual married women in Astana and Almaty. Informants belong to the urban middle-class, mostly employed, educated, have access to social networks and financial assets. Controlling for structural factors showcases how, for instance, apartment ownership expands women's decision-making horizon in marriage. Family practices or the acts of 'doing' are associated with reflexivity, display, choice, and structural constraints that impact individual agency. In developing this analysis, I identify actions constituting family practices as those displayed by research participants in their narrative constructions during interviews, conveying 'that certain of their actions do constitute doing family things and thereby confirm that these relationships are family relationships' (Finch 2007, 67). Practices range from negotiations and bargaining over living arrangements, strategically utilizing co-residence for the future autonomy by means of sharing living expenses with relatives, implementing proactive strategies to avoid co-residence, developing personal strategies of performing different social roles, challenging gender norms that are associated with household management and caregiving responsibilities, employing financial or emotional leverages to assert control over marital decision-making, engaging in residence mobility, and even mentioning divorce as a rhetorical move to advance interests or exhibit control. While practices are somewhat similar and revolve around arrangements within newlyweds' nuclear family and with relatives, the actions and strategies undertaken by women differ. Family is a dynamic structure and marriage is a long-term project, where arrangements and responsibilities change through time – thus, individuals narrate various stories, and display a diverse set of behaviors and communicative strategies.

In different circumstances and changing situations, the nature of individual agency varies as people 'use, adapt, or invent tradition' as they 'improvise family practices' (Carter and Duncan 2017, 2). While individuals may rely on collective moralities that derive from

traditions through a process of cultural socialization, they may also act on the premises of rationality, considering factors such as income, education, or physical attractiveness to improve their quality of life (Becker 1973; 1991). Others seek to build a 'pure relationship' to achieve emotional satisfaction and a sense of personal fulfillment and companionship (Giddens 1992). Women's narratives and articulations, that include their discursive patterns and interpretative repertoires, reveal the themes of individual agency and decision-making in marriage. Personal stories depict how individual women consciously and unconsciously, rationally, and emotionally experience marriage, and develop diverse family practices by discursively examining or adapting to traditions and introducing new arrangements. Further to this, the emphasis on practices and women's narrative displays draws attention to how marriage and family are experienced as relational practices in their own right.

Linking family practices with women's agency in marriage involves examining how newlyweds' residence patterns, family dynamics and interactions, daily routines, variability in performing traditions impact women's ability to assert independence, make decisions and take control over various aspects of their lives. Analyzing marriage as a dynamic element of interpersonal relations with an emphasis on individual decision-making allows to reformulate tradition and family from being 'habitual, easily-available guide to action' to 'do-it-yourself' system of behaviors (Carter and Duncan 2017, 12). The rationale for this research is to study Kazakh married women's ways of 'doing' family in practice - when, how and what Kazakh married women do to utilize their agency within their marriages? I seek to explore women's individual and creative acts, and performances of agency in relation to newlyweds' residence patterns or *intergenerational proximity*[9] to their extended kinship, by using women's agency as a tool for analysis and study it with a regard to newlyweds' residence patterns.

[9] The term 'intergenerational proximity' refers to the distance or geographic proximity between parents and their adult children. It is argued that it affects relational commitments, support needs between newlyweds and their respective kin. It probes into the interplay between vicinity and partnership or giving and receiving resources and care (Zhang 2012; Gruijters 2019; Kalmijin 2021).

The selected residence patterns encompass patrilocal, matrilocal, bilocal and neolocal arrangements as a focal point to examine women's expressions of agency in marriage and to explore the diversity of contemporary Kazakh family practices. Patrilocal residence pattern refers to co-residence or nearby residence to groom's relatives, matrilocal residence pattern is defined as either co-residence or nearby residence to bride's relatives, bilocal residence pattern signifies a living arrangement where a married couple resides close to both sets of relatives, while neolocal residence pattern is a practice where newlyweds establish their household away from both bride's and groom's relatives (Gruijters 2019). Patrilocal residence aligns with traditional family expectations; in patrilineal societies, if newlyweds co-reside with parents, it typically involves the husband's family. In contrast, matrilocal co-residence is considered non-normative, with only one out of 32 couples in the study co-residing with the wife's parents. The woman in this case, while acknowledging the arrangement as unconventional, did not view it as extraordinary. For bilocal couples, co-residence is almost exclusively patrilocal. Neolocal arrangements are often pursued by newlyweds who previously co-resided patrilocally, reflecting urban couples' desire for greater autonomy. Each living arrangements reveals a unique family dynamic; however, it is essential to recognize that women's performances and newlyweds' family practices do not maintain a linear correlation with proximity to relatives. In some case, the nuances of this interplay are shaped by the personalities involved and the extent to which relatives perform as cooperators or competitors.[10]

Depending on newlyweds' living arrangements, I also ask the following questions: how do women perform agency, depending on where they live? For instance, would bride's 'doing' of marriage change if they live near her natal kin, or how would patrilocal co-residence affect her decision-making? These questions uncover creative performances of women's agency in

[10] Relatives as 'cooperators' implies that family members support the newlyweds' marital stability by offering resources, assistance, or guidance. On contrary, 'competitors' are those who, either subtly or overtly, undermine the couple's marital dynamic by interfering with their household decisions in ways that may facilitate tensions (Carter and Duncan 2017).

marriage and shed light at contemporary Kazakh family practices, the flexibility of the institution of marriage, and how individual agency is performed in a bricolage of 'tradition' and 'modernity' as it is relational to other family members and 'the social'.

1.2. *Co-residence: Discomfort mitigated by Economic Benefits and Convenience*

The most dynamic and vibrant expressions of family life and practices are often observed within co-residential living arrangements, where cohabitation of newlyweds with parents fosters active engagement in daily life, through which families are constituted and maintained. The attention to co-residential arrangements in this study stems from the significance that the informants themselves assigned to it in their narrative constructions. By aligning my analysis with what women chose to emphasize, each narrative conveys the priorities highlighted by the narrators themselves. In this introduction, I will briefly touch upon several cases to establish the context, while in the Chapter 3 and subsequent chapters, these cases and women's narratives are analyzed in greater detail. Additionally, I would like to point out that while most research participants agreed to have their real names used, some requested pseudonyms.

Among 32 research participants, 15 women reflected on their patrilocal living experience, with ten newlyweds co-residing with the groom's parents for some period. Arguably, this finding upholds the resilience of patrilineal norms that shape newlyweds' residential arrangements and reveals the intricate connection between residential and affiliation patterns. According to informants, co-residence, whether patrilocal or matrilocal, significantly shape women's experiences in marriage, and kinship relations are made and remade through every-day interactions. During the interviews, women were also directly asked whether they believed there was a relationship between their living arrangements and their agency. To illustrate topics invoked, I choose 15 random responses that can be organized into four categories. The first group or 33,3% of informants emphasized that living away from in-laws fosters autonomy and reduces conflict. For instance, Arunaz from Almaty who resides patrilocally shared:

For sure yes, when we lived separately, I did not have to coordinate my decisions with my mother-in-law, and we got along much better. (Arunaz)

The second group of interlocutors or 26,6% underlined that physical distance does not always guarantee autonomy, or as Lyazzat from Astana who lives bilocally suggested that:

Being distant from parents allows for greater separation and autonomy. However, much depends on the specificities of the relationships between parents and children. If you constantly seek parental approval in your mind, then the distance does not matter. There are many nuances to consider. (Lyazzat)

The third group of respondents or 20% emphasized a broader desire for independence from both sets of parents or relatives, and the fourth group or 20% highlighted the advantages of living closer to the natal family, suggesting that women while being married rely on emotional or practical support of their family of origin. Women's decision-making power is closely associated with their social context, including norms within family structures (Cheong 2017; Richardson et al 2019). Each living arrangement comes with its own set of advantages and disadvantages, reflecting complex trade-offs that individuals must navigate. On the one hand, several women who co-resided patrilocally reflected on appreciating the support they have received from their in-laws, particularly in managing household duties and childcare, or receiving financial and emotional support. From their narratives, this arrangement seems to strengthen family bonds and provide a sense of security and belonging. On the other hand, the same women shared how co-residence often comes at the cost of personal autonomy. Over time, newlyweds who have experienced co-residence often express a desire to establish their own independent household. The move toward a separate household reflects the couples' pursuit of autonomy, the reduction of familial conflicts – this transition can also be seen as a part of a broader process of individualization and the negotiation of modernity within traditional societal frameworks.

While co-residence, particularly patrilocal, is traditionally associated with adherence to cultural norms and expectations of extended family, newlyweds strategically use this period to accumulate savings with the intention of eventually moving out. This decision, while often perceived as adherence to tradition, is significantly driven by financial constraints, such as the high cost of housing and the necessity of accumulating savings. Newlyweds often do not end up co-residing primarily due to traditional expectations, but rather because of economic considerations. By taking advantage of reduced living expenses, newlyweds can prepare for establishing their independent household. Likewise, the practice of co-residence though outwardly conforming to traditional expectations, indeed showcases a form of *bricolage*. In other words, newlyweds reconcile respect for cultural norms with their aspirations for autonomy, demonstrating how tradition can be adapted to serve contemporary goals. In this way, they creatively navigate their circumstances, ensuring both the preservation of familial ties and the pursuit of personal freedom.

What is more important, women's narratives suggest that regardless of whether newlyweds co-reside patrilocally or matrilocally, it is often the women who assert the need to move out and establish an independent household. This phenomenon is recognized in both anthropological and sociological studies of family dynamics in post-Soviet contexts, including Kazakhstan. Due to subsistence of patrilineality in Central Asia, patrilocal co-residence remains prevalent, deeply influencing women's role and decision-making horizon in marriage (Turaeva 2017; Kudaibergenova 2018). According to the informants, under the norm of patrilocal co-residence, women's decision-making is significantly constrained as bride often occupies a subordinate position within their husband's family. Aksana Ismailbekova (2018) and Diana Kudaibergenova (2018) highlighted that the role of women in family settings often puts them at the center of household management – women's roles, traditionally shaped by expectations of caregiving and household duties can become particularly demanding during

co-residence with relatives. This living arrangement requires *kelin* to conform to the existing household rules and expectations, limiting her autonomy and, as informants' narratives suggest, prompting a performance of the reactive agentic force. Despite societal constraints such as in-laws' surveillance or demands to conform to the image of *kelin*, interviewees shared that they perform their agentic self by displaying a critical awareness of one's self-defined objectives and goals, as they undertake purposeful action to assert control over their daily lives and strategic goals – women tend to discursively examine and challenge social structures to introduce changes into family practices. Likewise, during pre-marital negotiations, it is typically the women who initiate discussions regarding the division of duties and responsibilities, and other arrangements pertaining to family life. Later, they often advocate for establishing an independent household separate from parents and relatives. This tendency may be attributed to the fact that informants come from an urban middle-class background, which provides them with the social and economic capital necessary to engage in bargaining within their marital arrangements.

Research on gender and agency in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia indicates that middle-class individuals, particularly in urban settings, often leverage their social and economic resources to negotiate better outcomes in various life domains, including marriage (Kandiyoti 1988; Ismailbekova 2022). Karabchuk et al (2021), in their book *Gendering Post-Soviet Space*, highlighted that a higher socio-economic standing enables women to assert their preferences more confidently than their counterparts from other social strata – in other words, middle and upper classes often have greater access to resources, opportunities and education, which in turn allows them to examine, challenge and redefine their roles and traditional norms in more flexible ways.

Most informants, who co-resided with either set of parents eventually sought to establish their own independent household. Furthermore, newlyweds in this study have experienced

changes in their residence patterns over time, which allows them to reflect on and compare different living arrangements. Their ability to draw on diverse experiences enables a more nuanced understanding of how different residence patterns impact marital dynamics – this comparative perspective is particularly valuable in examining how shifts in living arrangements influence the exercise of agency. According to informants, a willingness to establish an independent household is often associated with a greater privacy and autonomy, a freedom in setting newlyweds' own rules, routines, and managing their relationship dynamic without external interference. Furthermore, women stated that a separate household can be seen as a way to navigate the generational differences between a younger couple and an older generation of their parents and relatives, without constant friction. Newlyweds who initially co-resided with parents or lived in close proximity to them, with frequent interactions, later described how transitioning to a neolocal residence fostered a stronger bond within their nuclear family. Symbat and Akerke from Astana emphasized that the physical distance from kin facilitated the husband and wife drawing closer together, improved communication between them, and allowed for a clearer focus on their own shared goals and plans. This shift to neolocality or living far from both sets of parents and relatives, is seen as instrumental in reinforcing marital unity and autonomy, as the couple is able navigate their relationship dynamics more independently, away from the direct influence of extended family members.

In examining the dynamics of kinship relations, scholars have noted that kin can be broadly categorized into 'cooperators' and 'non-cooperators' based on their willingness or capacity to provide support to newlyweds. These ideas draw from the broader fields of kin selection theory and social support systems, scholars like David Sloan Wilson and Edward Osborne Wilson in *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (1998), Jonathan Birch and Samir Okasha in *Cultural Group Selection and Human Cooperation* (2015) have explored these concepts in the context of multi-level selection theory, discussing how cooperation and

altruism can evolve within family groups and vary in their impact on newlyweds. Cooperators, often motivated by kin selection and reciprocal altruism, tend to support the newlyweds, contributing to their well-being, while non-cooperators either fail to provide the necessary support or may even act in ways that are counterproductive, thereby failing to satisfy newlyweds' support needs. Irrespective of whether the kin involved are the bride's or groom's parents, relatives can play a dual role in the lives of newlyweds. On the one hand, supportive kin can offer essential resources, emotional support and guidance that foster the couples' success in their life together. On the other hand, interfering relatives can negatively impact the newlyweds' relationship by imposing undue pressure, creating misunderstanding and conflicts. Likewise, kin have a dual potential – it highlights the complex nature of family dynamics and the importance of carefully navigating these relationships.

1.3. *Marriage: Agency*

In studying women's agency and writing up their narratives, I stumbled upon a dilemma – is it necessary to name performances of agency, define them and group accordingly. The 'agentive power' can be exercised in a variety of different ways peculiar to an individual actor as it is differential – it is exercised adaptively, creatively and from what is available and has the best social fit (Jackson 2012). Agency is usually relational or bound with a partner or parents and relatives, or circumstantial arrangements and responsibilities, it can be reduced to patience or resistance, agency can also be purposeful and strategic (Duncan and Carter 2018, 206). Agentive power can be exercised in response to external pressures, or it can intuitively, and sometimes unconsciously, and routinely be performed daily through implementing different conversational and communicative strategies. There is an abundance of theoretical attempts to operationalize the term 'agency', yet I suggest that understanding *action* and *doing*, especially in terms of personal lives, requires placing lived experiences and emotion centre-stage. Therefore, I do not aim to categorize the different performances of agency. On contrary,

I prioritize women' narratives and their reflexivity on what and how do they do in their personal lives, assuming that they are all reflexive individuals who are capable of strategic, purposeful, and active agency.

The interview questions were not designed to address the issues related to divorce or any associated circumstance. However, findings suggest that women's agency in marriage is also displayed by the decision to apply for divorce, and a willingness to share and reflect on this experience. While acting upon divorce is an extreme measure, most of the researched women used a potential partnership dissolution as a regulative measure to advance their interests and inform their partners that existing arrangements do not work. Importantly, the word 'divorce' frequently reappeared in the narratives of those women who have had an experience of patrilocal co-residence. Further to this, women who did not apply for divorce, shared how they utilized the word 'divorce' to advance their interests, especially during conflicts or when disputes, or costs of marriage, seemed to prevail over gains and benefits from marriage. In other words, when women felt dissatisfied in their marriages – often for reasons that are highly individual and context-specific – they frequently considered divorce or thought about invoking the threat of divorce during disputes. The reasons for their dissatisfaction can range from unmet emotional needs, lack of communication, to conflicts with in-laws or feelings of entrapment within the marriage. On the one hand, it is the act of a purposeful agency or an intentional ability of an individual to act in accordance with personal values, interests, and desires (Jensen 2003). On the other hand, divorce can also be referred as subversive agency or women's capacity to challenge and resist traditional norms, overcome the social disapproval of this decision, it is a covert act aimed at disrupting existing structure of order and power (Fournier 2014, 17).

Among 32 newlyweds who took part in this research, two couples ended up divorcing, and overall, ten women utilized 'divorce' in their narratives – it seems that 'as marriage began to

be seen as a personal relationship designed to fulfill needs and ensure happiness and less as an institution necessary for survival, divorce became more common' (Coleman and Ganong 1992, 113). According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in 2023 among 24.5 thousand marriages, there were 3.9 thousand registered divorces – around 16% of married couples ended up divorcing, yet there is no information whether these were newlyweds or not.[11] Given that the researched group is comprised of middle-class urban women from Astana and Almaty, it is known that they have an access to education, financial resources and assets, or economic independence and social support networks. Therefore, they tend to weight costs and benefits of marriage depending on their interests and satisfaction level, rather than the necessity for survival or to conform to traditional norms. Furthermore, the two women who pursued marital dissolution had children, yet little is known about the trends in reproductive and marital behavior. Following the interviews, my general hypothesis explaining this interplay is that when confronted with marital unhappiness and depending on the perceptions of related difficulties, women with children are more likely to apply for divorce if they are confident that they will receive support from their families of origin.

When it comes to matrimony and kinship relations, all of the family members 'are of equal importance to the network…' and 'what differentiates one actor from another is the agentive power of that actor, specifically the ways that an actor can change experiences of time and space throughout the network or in relation to specific actors (Callon 1986; Mitchell 2002; Lien and Law 2011 in Wolf-Meyer 2020, 232). Likewise, when considering divorce, individual women tend to appeal to rational choice and rational thinking – am I better off in or out of marriage, or how do I better my personal welfare? The points of discontent, as seen from the interviews, tend to touch upon one or multiple reasons related to four main domains of

[11] Stat.gov.kz, Bureau of National Statistics. 2023, Retrieved from: https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/demography/publications/39983/#

newlyweds' life. First, place of residence and its arrangement - co-residence with either of sets of parents, or nearby residence, or a neolocal arrangement. Second, the relationships with groom's and bride's kin, and whether relatives perform as competitors or cooperators – relying upon the support from relatives or, on the contrary, providing support. Third, developing individual strategies of cohabitation with a spouse, depending on personal behavioral scripts or personality traits, and background (both personal and familial). Fourth, coming to terms and managing to accommodate their marriage's own democracy within cultural certainties, while aspiring towards the realization of individual self-projects.

Reconciling marriage, cultural certainties, and mythology of the family with self-projects requires examining and altering some elements of tradition, or on contrary, following traditionally prescribed norms – these are the choices that are made through the 'acts of agency' within a process of situational strategizing. Following the interviews, I observed that the points of discontent within newlyweds' nuclear family rarely originate from issues related to household management or who buys groceries, washes dishes or is responsible for maintaining cleanliness in the household. Oftentimes, ongoing conflict is associated with unresolved issues pertaining to housing and living arrangements, relatives' intervention into a married couple's decision-making, and a failure to stick with pre-marital agreements and commitments.

Arguably, I only observed the research participants for only eight months and this period is not enough to draw conclusions about behavioral patterns and practices, or divorce proceedings among Kazakh urban newlyweds – this is beyond the scope of my research interests. However, without asking women about their opinion on divorce, I observed that women tend to share that divorce remains an option, especially when unresolved issues remain problematic – the text search for 'divorce' (*razvod* in Russian) in interview transcripts confirms that the usage of this term is not infrequent. Likewise, I was witnessing divorce proceedings initiated by one of the research participants – Nurai from Astana. Her narratives contained reflections on making a

considerable effort on sustaining marriage, becoming a 'perfect *kelin*' and an 'unfussy wife', overcoming a sense of loneliness – all while newlyweds changed their residence arrangements from patrilocal co-residence to bilocal residence, and then to neolocal arrangement. As it usually happens, the premises for making this decision were multiple and, as was narrated by Nurai, included the following: a long period of cohabitation with the groom's parents (patrilocal co-residence), therefore, the inability to develop and construct 'their own family' in 'their own way', the adultery of a spouse, and consequently the absence of trust and understanding between them. In this case, while married, Nurai tempted different ways of 'doing' family – her agency was once reduced to loneliness and patience, and later developed into a purposeful agency performed through filing for divorce. There, divorce is in by itself the 'act' of 'doing' or performing agency – claiming or reclaiming agency over Nurai's personal life. In this case, marriage as 'a form of exchange' did not satisfy Nurai's expectations and needs, and divorce seemed to be a way out that could potentially improve her well-being. While all the couples, at some period of time, found themselves dealing with major disagreements, they act differently. Patrilocality was not found to be a cause for divorce, on contrary, it usually opens the discussions about moving and changing a given residential pattern to 'away from patrilocality' – it therefore creates a playground, where spouses start to mitigate using the available leverages at their disposal. Likewise, women usually appeal to bargaining, persuasion, turning a blind eye, delivering an 'ultimatum', as they tend to reiterate.

While informants, irrespectively of residence patterns, demonstrated satisfaction in their marriages, the word 'divorce' occasionally reappeared in some of the stories. Given that research and the 'dialogic' experiment was conducted for around eight months, I have had a chance to observe how newlyweds negotiate and resolve some of the personal and marital issues and consciously avoid partnership dissolution. Even as the 'observer' who does not live with the informants and has no 'live' access to their 'experiences', I was granted an access to

the perplexities of informants' lives, and the circumstances that are usually hidden from, sometimes, even the closest circle of friends. Findings suggest that, while women narrate about dissatisfaction or conflicts in their marital life, they seem to prioritize staying married because, arguably, marriage offers more than financial security or 'status' of being married, but also a sense of love and partnership, sexual gratification, care, and romantic love.

Every encounter with another informant puzzled me with additional questions. What do women aspire to gain from marriage? How do women better their personal well-being if the perceived costs of marriage outweigh the perceived benefits? Presumably, the answer to these questions lies within the essence of Kazakhstani marriage market and a conformity to traditions – why do women decide to marry and what do they have to offer, both emotionally and economically, and what do they expect to get? One of the common trends in women's narratives explaining their willingness to getting married is their anticipation of a relative stability in marriage nourished by the 'universal' concept of romantic love. They reflected upon romantic attachments, promises, sexual gratification, cozy evenings together, travelling and, sometimes, raising children. These expectations that, according to some of the informants, were shattered against the realities of 'doing' family and managing relational commitments, financial or emotional hardships – as the word 'rose-colored glasses' reappeared in numerous storylines. I also noticed that besides emotional reasoning, sometimes, women were implicitly compelled to getting married – usually, by their parents and relatives. Participants tend to reflect on how their relatives insisted on marriage, especially if a couple dated for a long period of time – usually, the questions emerged after two or three years of dating; in conventional understanding, a couple is expected to perpetuate their union via marriage. In other cases, women were propelled to getting married after graduation or after completing a significant life project, to apparently, progress into another - marriage and childbearing – is a normative and an expected life path for a Kazakh woman (Agadjanian 1999).

The informants rarely reflected upon being explicitly pressured to marry, most of them narrated as if a decision to marry was made from love and a personal willingness to share a life with a partner. Nonetheless narratives indicate how marriage, formally, allows a couple to cohabitate because without consummating marriage, it is considered inappropriate to share bed and table; this is not to say that the research participants avoided cohabitation prior to marriage, yet the official consummation of a marital contract granted them a status of privilege and a sense that their union is being approved and accepted by relatives and acquaintances. This also illustrates that, while there are various permissible forms of behavior among urban young couples, those that are socially approved remain in the minority – nonetheless, urban individuals tend to act based on their own judgements and available resources.

1.4. *Marriage: Rationality and Emotion*

It would be 'sociologically naïve' to assert that individual decision-making in marriage is derivative of a calculated choice and a continuous, conscious balancing between costs and benefits (Roseneil 2000, 15). Emotion, sentiments, attachments, and rationality, often perceived as opposing forces, are not inherently antithetical in the context of marital and familial negotiations. Marriage creates a dynamic playground where individuals and families craft and shape experiences that generate a diverse array of emotional sentiments and attachments over time. *Kelins*, as outsiders to the family, shared that they face similar expectations of household work, which predetermines the specific role they take in a family structure. There is a general understanding around daughters-in-law propriety and performance, yet the feelings that these expectations invoke usually remain overlooked. How this role is evaluated and approached often depends on individual circumstances, including the living arrangements. The affective and tangible relations that bind *kelins* and their parents-in-law depend on social ties – greater family proximity intensifies relational dynamics, fostering

emotional exchange, providing more reasons for individuals to feel and reflect on their interactions.

As the relationship evolves, it not only binds the couple but also brings their extended families together, enriching the emotional fabric of everyone's lives. For instance, several informants shared that they initially felt like outsiders in husbands' family, but over time, as family spent more time together during holidays and family gatherings, women began to feel like a real part of the family. Similarly, Aidana, one of the informants, highlighted the emotional depth that marriage can acquire over time. She described how the initial period of co-residence with her husband's parents was challenging, marked by frequent conflicts over household responsibilities. Nevertheless, she also noted how: 'over time, as we learned to communicate better and understood each other's perspectives, relationship had improved. Now, I see my mother-in-law (*qaiynene*) as a second mother, someone I can rely on'. Aidana's account showcases how the emotional dynamics within a marriage can shift and evolve, adding new layers of mutual understanding and support. Furthermore, while mothers-in-law are usually depicted as 'domineering', invoking the clichéd interplay between *qaiynene* and *kelin*, 'mothers-in-law are also constrained by the moral evaluations, affective relationships, and material conditions the relationship entails' (McBrien 2021, 339).

Emotions are embedded in social relations and can be strategically used by women to navigate their positions within family structures, where expressions of affection, care and even strategic silence can serve as tools for maintaining or renegotiating women's roles in marriage. Emotions in marriage are not simply hidden or passive experiences, they are dynamic forces that affect power dynamics, communication, behavioral responses, and decision-making. For instance, positive emotions often lead to collaborative decision-making, while resentment and anger might result in conflict. Familial relations are not static, they are characterized by fluidity, where periods of resentment and conflict can evolve into mutual understanding and resolutions,

and conversely, times of harmony can turn into renewed tensions. Thus, Roza from Astana who lives in patrilocal nearby arrangement stated that: 'About 70% of the time, we do not stick to the agreements, but we do remember them and try to adhere to them, especially after repeating the same mistakes. I feel like my husband is dissatisfied with me because I do not give in. He wants me to be a little calmer'. Overall, following women's narratives, effective communication in marriage is significantly influenced by emotions – they can facilitate open dialogue or hinder communication through emotional barriers such as frustration and anger. Furthermore, beyond the emotional dynamics within the couple itself, relatives may also contribute additional layers to the relationship within a nuclear family of the two – whether positive or negative, again by means of performing either as cooperators or competitors. Roza, while their couple lives independently, shared that her husband's mother is 'domineering' and tends to invade their personal space with unsolicited advice and commentaries. Although Roza's mother-in-law is domineering, her husband effectively maintains the boundaries of their nuclear family.

Following that, sometimes, the relationship between newlyweds' can be strained by the emotional dynamics with their relatives. While mothers-in-law are expected to 'instruct' young *kelins*, their authority extends to influence over their sons. For example, Ainur, who co-resides patrilocally, shared how her relationship with the husband was affected by her mother-in-law's feelings of jealousy. A prominent discursive pattern among the informants is the sentiment that 'they needed to separate their husbands from their mothers', irrespectively of the physical proximity. Ainur explained that her mother-in-law's surveillance and expectations created tensions within the household, to the point where Ainur considered divorce within the first month of marriage. Ainur conveyed that:

> *She (mother-in-law) used to manipulate him (Ainur's husband) all his life, for all his 28 years, and it was hard for him to step away from that. She was very controlling, and*

when I came into the picture, she began to feel jealous and tried to command him even more. I noticed that she would often try to drive a wedge between us, and her jealousy became evident in how she interacted with both of us. This created tension in our marriage, especially in the first few months of living together, where I felt constantly pressured by her behavior. (Ainur)

This situation highlights how the emotional dynamics with relatives, particularly those who co-reside or are closely involved in the newlyweds' lives, can deeply affect the couple's relationship. Ainur's experience reflects a broader phenomenon where relatives' concerns and emotions can disrupt the harmony in marriage by introducing additional stressors and conflicts that the couple must navigate. What is more important, despite being initially overwhelmed by her mother-in-law's controlling behavior and jealousy, Ainur recognized the need to assert her own boundaries to protect her marital relationship and her own well-being.

While the prevailing rhetoric often portrays married women as submissive and dominated, women's narratives in this research reveal how, under pressure, women tend to expand their decision-making horizon, exercising a form of assertive agency. Ainur's agency is evident in her strategic decision to establish firm boundaries with her mother-in-law, a response triggered by the latter's frequent interference and attempts to control the household dynamics. She understood that, given her mother-in-law's history of manipulating her husband, it was necessary for her to take proactive steps to redefine the power dynamics. In instances when the relations with parents-in-law become strained, women dedicate considerable attention to strengthening their relations with their husband and navigating family dynamics through these connections. One of the key instances where Ainur exercised her agency was when she decided to stop silently enduring her mother-in-law's behavior and instead began to explicitly communicate her dissatisfaction, not to her mother-in-law but to her husband. Importantly, Ainur's decision to communicate her dissatisfaction through her husband rather than directly

confronting her mother-in-law was a strategic choice deeply rooted in cultural and relational considerations. In Kazakh society, where respect for elders is paramount, directly challenging an elder could be seen as disrespectful and might escalate tensions within the family (Kudaibergenova 2018). By addressing her concerns with her husband, Ainur adhered to cultural norms while still ensuring that her issues were acknowledged and addressed. Likewise, while occupying a position of weakness, there are ways in which a *kelin* can adapt and create opportunities for asserting her interests. Finally, Ainur might have chosen this indirect approach as the way to ensure a peaceful household environment. The interaction that took place between Ainur and her mother-in-law suggests that this relationship is much more complicated than labor relationships. Julie McBrien, a Dutch anthropologist who has conducted extensive research on issues of gender and marriage in the context of Central Asia, investigated day-to-day relationship between *kelins* and their *qaiynene* (mothers-in-law). According to McBrien's (2020, 339) article '*On Mothers - and Daughters-in-law*', the representation of *kelins* as powerless and their mothers-in-law as 'domineering, heavy-handed, unreasonable, and sometimes outright cruel' provides a simplified picture. In her article, *kelin* Aigul, while being an outsider to her husbands' families, 'can maneuver and make space' for herself even if it sometimes requires 'not following the pattern' – in the case of Aigul, she did not stay at her parents-in-law home after childbirth, instead, Aigul preferred to stay with her natal family. This and many other examples shed light at the possible relationship dynamics between family members, interplays that go beyond 'expectations and need' (McBrien 2020, 342). On the one hand, the relationship between kelin and her mother-in-law entails the transmission of knowledge or instructions on fulfilling basic relational duties within household, managing relational dynamics through other family members, which overall highlights how this interplay is indeed '…an affective relationship, established in part through the birth of grandchildren but also through dutiful performance of expected household labor' (McBrien

2020, 343). On the other hand, there is an underlying dynamic that guides the interplay between *qaiynenes* and *kelin*s that makes mothers-in-law responsible for the behavior of their daughters-in-law as older women's authority comes with social responsibility and moral evaluations (McBrien 2020, 343).

Ainur's experience illustrates the complexities women face in navigating familial relations within marriage, where the need to set boundaries and assert agency become critical for maintaining harmony. These challenges are often rooted in the arrangements and foundations laid during pre-marital phase, where young couples engage in negotiations to define their roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Just as Ainur had to establish boundaries with her mother-in-law to protect her marriage, many women begin this process prior to marriage, carefully negotiating the terms of their future life together. Understanding these pre-marital negotiations is essential to grasp the full scope of how women perform their agency in marriage. Furthermore, during the pre-marital phase, when newlyweds are engaged in drafting and negotiating the boundaries of their future roles, responsibilities, and mutual expectations, women often emphasized the importance of clearly delineating these aspects before entering marriage. This strategic negotiation is crucial, as it allows both partners to establish a shared understanding of their respective duties that will govern their marital relationship. As evidenced in the narratives of the women in this study and supported by scholars like Hirsch and Wardlow (2006), these pre-marital negotiations involve a calculated consideration of practical responsibilities, even as emotions and sentiments run high. Likewise, young couples, often characterized by strong romantic involvement, engage in what could be described as a dual process – while they indulge in the romantic idealism and deep emotional connections typical of this life stage, they also strategically negotiate their future roles in marriage. Hirsch et al (2007) suggest that pre-marital period is associated with an idealized view of love and romance, with couples often described as being 'madly in love', which can sometimes obscure

the practical considerations of marital life. However, as findings showcase, this intense emotional feeling does not preclude young couples' from making rational and strategic arrangements through deliberate bargaining.

Marriage has been positively associated with 'greater earnings and consumption for family members' and other measures of well-being (Ribar 2004, 11). Other studies go further to differentiate between distressed and non-distressed couples, high and low conflict tasks, selfishness and generosity, emotional satisfaction and disgust, communicative strategies of the mediation practice, desired qualities in spouses and 'conversely the faults actually experienced' (John et al 1976; Carter and Duncan 2017, 33; Greco Morasso 2009). Interviewed women narrated marriage and interpersonal relations in romanticized ways, they emphasized emotional and spiritual experiences. The ways in which research participants reflected on their marital experiences often reveal a strong emotional undercurrent that coexists with rational decision-making. This was evident in the range of emotions they expressed, from frustration to empathy. Their narratives are shaped not only by these emotional responses but also by the discursive patterns they employ when discussing relationships with in-laws. For instance, the tone, voice, and tempo of their speech often shift when recounting moments of conflicts or reconciliation, signaling the complex interplay between emotional and rational thought. As I have noticed, the beginning of the interviews contained more sentimental reflections, while by the middle, the informants usually started to open-up and narrate the actual perplexities and imbalances in marital or filial relations. Sometimes patrilocal co-residence was described as a symbolic act of connectedness and continuity of a family line, rather than seeing it as a historically patriarchal practice, or *betashar*[12] was displayed as a sacrifice or an incidence of humiliation. While women reflect on their experiences during dialogic interactions with a researcher, they

[12] The tradition of *betashar*, or the unveiling ceremony, is a cultural and traditional ritual during Kazakh weddings. It involves a bride's formal introduction to a groom's family – a bride bows to her new family as a gesture of internalization of her new familial role as a wife and kelin (Werner 1999).

re-invent some elements of their stories to fit the 'hegemonic romantic ideal' or to discursively examine it (Carter and Duncan 2017, 50). They may narrate current displeasing circumstances or pressures yet assert how 'that is their choice'. Some women want their husbands to be breadwinners, others prefer to keep marriage as '50/50'. One of the informants Dina from Almaty transferred the responsibilities over childcare to her husband, and in three weeks post-partum returned to work – the social exchange theory does not necessarily respond to individual expectations and desired gains from marriage.

When a researcher delves into what happened within marriages, it becomes clear that the actual practice and performance of personal life rarely follows a pragmatist script. There is no strict binary between rationality and emotion, it is imperative to emphasize that individuals do not always appeal to rationality, nor do they possess unbounded reflexivity. Furthermore, they also rely upon traditions 'to inform and understand themselves and relate to others' in informal circumstances such as families, or in formal occasions during interviews (Carter and Duncan 2017, 58). By bounded reflexivity, scholars imply that individuals perform agency in relation to their partners, other family members, and authoritative ideas about family and marriage that derive from traditions. While people tend to make lifestyle choices themselves, based on their needs and preferences, they also 'achieve legitimation by displaying to those around them that their practices constitute doing family things and that their relationship is a family relationship' and choose between available behavioral scripts based on what has the best social fit (Finch 2007 in Carter 2016, 4).

Shorn of theoretical assumptions, what reconciles family, love, and agency? According to *social-exchange theory*, individuals decide to marry and remain married based on 'the returns to marriage versus the returns to remaining single' (Cook and Rice 2002, 23). Along with *social-exchange theory*, marriage appears as the form of negotiation or a form of exchange between spouses in attempts to gain benefits and avoid costs. Benefits and costs account for

the resources that encompass more than economic gains and include support systems, social capital, and mutual benefit. There, residence patterns may determine power allocation, distribution of resources and affect marital decisions and stability, because marriage involves broader social networks. In patrilocal societies, groom's parents and relatives might control economic resources, influencing the nature of exchange and power dynamics within newlyweds' nuclear family (Blau 1964). In neolocal arrangements, it is expected that newlyweds would prioritize emotional satisfaction and partnership which corresponds with the 'pure relationship' model (Giddens 1992). Overall, residence patterns determine the extent of kinship obligations and a degree to how close the interaction between newlyweds and their relatives would be. Newlyweds living near or with extended family may encounter additional pressures, demands and support dynamics compared to couples living neolocally. The differences in intergenerational proximity to extended family and support dynamics can influence the responsibilities and roles of each partner as well as the perceived costs and benefits (Thibault and Kelley 1959).

Likewise, in the context of marriage, individuals evaluate their contributions and gains that may include emotional support, financial stability, household management. Informants infrequently mentioned how their husbands act as '*helpers*' or 'on mne pomogaet' in Russian (he helps me) in matters pertaining to childcare, household management and navigating through the perplexities of interpersonal relations with extended kin. However, Aidana and Aliya from Astana who co-reside patrilocally, for instance, agreed that co-residence alleviates husbands' responsibilities and turns them into inert observers who manage their nuclear family around the resources provided by parents. When the husbands exhibit inertia in engaging with household responsibilities or familial interactions, the relatives or in-laws often step in as partners, with the wife increasingly relying on them for support or decision-making. This reliance can manifest in various forms, such as seeking advice, emotional backing, and

practical assistance. However, the increased interaction with relatives, particularly in the context of co-residence, can also lead to conflicts and tensions.

Another informant, Aliya shared that their current patrilocal co-residence is the fault of a 'Kazakh mentality' that requires *kelin* to co-reside with husband's parents for a year to internalize the norms of a new family. Importantly, her parents live nearby in Astana and when she offered her husband to relocate and try residing with her parents instead, he refused by saying that 'your mother would eat me alive'. Aliya is employed, while her husband is a medical student, she allocates her financial resources to satisfy the needs of both her husband and his parents. Aliya is also responsible for cooking and cleaning, while her husband occasionally goes for groceries and keeps his belongings tidy. By the middle of the interview, Aliya sadly enunciated that she feels like a squirrel in a cage and that her 'rose-colored glasses' have shattered, and she is compelled to communicate with her husband by delivering 'ultimatums'. Aliya also remembered how her father-in-law's reflected on their current situation, by noting: 'my son does not move or do something, because he is too comfortable living with us', and she agreed to it. Her choices in marriage are highly relational with other family members, she reflected upon a series of events where her actions and daily routines served the needs of other family members: 'I have to keep a diary of expenses and their debts, because they keep borrowing money from me – and even my husband's brothers', she also reflected on buying her husband a jacket – he is not fond of Aliya buying him clothes, yet she was worried that he would freeze. When a woman co-resides with her husband's parents, she becomes embedded within a broader and unfamiliar family system – she is perceived to become an integral part of the new family system.

Interestingly, although patrilineal norms and practices suggest that a *kelin* is fully integrated into her husband's family, several informants shared that they rely more on emotional and financial support from their natal families. Likewise, Aliya too co-resides patrilocally, yet

receives more support from her natal family – to be more specific, Aliya's parents help her to save up for an apartment. In a sense, the notions 'left her natal family' and 'joined her husband's family', that derive from patrilineal norms, are sometimes only euphemisms that soften or obscure what may actually happen in marriage or is likely to occur. By the end of our interaction, Aliya concluded that 'I thought that our marriage would be smooth, just like in movies – they wake up in the morning smiling, no problems'. Social exchange theory is not comprehensive enough to account why Aliya stays in marriage that compels her to feel 'like a squirrel in a cage', which only emphasizes that rational theories alone are insufficient to fully explain the complexities of familial decision-making. While Aliya receives support from her natal family to alleviate pressures, other women in similar circumstances adopt different strategies for addressing underlying issues. These strategies may include preventive measures to avoid co-residence with relatives, facilitating the moving-out regardless of expectations, or findings ways to adapt despite financial challenges. What is more important, while Aliya took time to reflect on the complexities of her marriage, she did not plan on ending the relationship, even though she does not view divorce as taboo. This emphasizes a broader theme of emotional bonds, small daily acts of care and affection, and private experiences that often remain hidden from an outsider's perspective, yet make marriages last, turning them from static experiences to avenues for developing new family practices to strengthen the relationship.

Residence patterns significantly influence the strategies women employ in navigating their nuclear families. For instance, in a bilocal arrangement, Aya from Astana utilized the proximity to both sets of parents to selectively determine the sources of support and resources to draw upon, as well as to decide which aspects of each family's dynamic to replicate within their own nuclear family. One of the women shared that in her marriage she used to copy her natal family's practices, where her mother was responsible for children, household management as she also worked full-time, while her father 'could not even make himself a cup of tea, it should

have been prepared for him by our mother'. She narrated how she changed this dynamic by introducing new practices to build their own unique family system. There, she 'taught' her husband to contribute equally both in household chores and financially by 'delegating' some of her responsibilities – the success, as she pointed out, could have been associated with her 'smart manipulation techniques'. Since their couple lives bilocally and interacts almost equally with both sets of parents, Aya used an opportunity to compare different family systems and practices to adjust and transform it into their unique dynamic. While their parents live nearby and satisfy Aya nuclear family's support needs by taking care of children, or sending organic foodstuff, Aya was not satisfied by performing as a primary responsible adult in the household consisting of herself, husband and two children, and when she noticed that the exchange was unequal, Aya suggested her husband to evaluate his contributions, maintain a balance to keep their relationships satisfying. Importantly, while some women frequently used the terms such as 'manipulated' and 'ultimatums', most of the informants emphasized open communication and partnership as their preferred means of navigating marital dynamics.

Additionally, Aya also reflected upon a period of patrilocal co-residence that lasted for about six months, her narrative emphasized that she did not 'show her character to his parents' even if co-residence was associated with discomfort and misunderstandings. While her husband 'just like all Kazakhs tend to believe' thought that it is appropriate to co-reside patrilocally, at least when their own apartment was under renovation, he has grown to understand that co-residence compels one to act like a child around parents – this was not a desired dynamic, thus, newlyweds sought to move out as quickly as possible. Informant's story showcases how if partners perceive an imbalance that can lead to conflict, and cooperatively evaluate their contributions and gains, they eventually adapt their relationship to new arrangements and needs. Moreover, her story suggests that when patrilocal co-residence is arranged for a specific period with a scheduled 'move-out' date, the probability of conflict

within a coupledom is lower. Lastly, Aya clarified that it would have been more complicated to maintain a balanced relationship in arrangements that presuppose co-residence with parents, because it is harder to maintain reciprocity among the two and it is almost impossible to achieve 'perceived fairness' within a wider circle of relatives. Accordingly, perceived costs of co-residence tend to be higher than in nearby arrangements because newlyweds feel less flexible in instances that require a close communication with broader social network that has its own regulations and norms.

1.5. *'Doing' Family: Personal Preferences and Perceptions of Love*

Intimate relations are replete with contradictions, ideological prominences, and rational calculations rarely dominate over personal preferences, sentimental attachments, and feelings of the 'gut'. The 'act of doing' boils down to a subject who becomes an instigator of either change or continuation through performing the agency 'freedom', or the 'freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides she/he should achieve', as she has 'the capacity to make decisions about one's own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear' (Amartya 1985, 80; Kabeer 1999, 436; Klugman 2014). It is fair to state that every newlywed couple handles the perplexities and fuzziness of marriage differently, even if they do somewhat resemble each other, or live in a similar residential occupation, and belong to a middle-class urban group. There is a variability in both couples' concordance and discordance, as well as in women's individual decision-makings, and structural factors and background. However, when faced with major disagreements in their marriages, only few married women made references to romantic love and emotive feelings – it might seem that marriage continues only when it is efficient, and ends when costs outweigh benefits, or when utility gains and commodities produced within marriage do not satisfy involved parties (Allen 1992). In a practical and rational sense, marriage may no longer bring

'benefits', however 'it retains a normative position as the ideal partnership form and as the public symbol of a successful relationship' (Carter and Duncan 2017, 56).

Further to this, most informants agreed that marriage is the continuation of affection – love can be looked upon as 'a part of society, as a distinctive pattern of social behavior – as a specific cultural trait' that is 'composed of a series of specific features or elements' (Greenfield 2016, 363). While acknowledging the importance of love in marital relations appears self-explanatory, such judgement assumes that there is a consensus on what *love* implies. This speculation goes far beyond the scope of this research, and I leave space for women's own narratives to shape and identify features of their agency-based *love,* because l*ove* is as much as noun or 'expression of feeling' as a verb or 'a promise of behavior' (Robbins 2015, 31 in Carrol 2018, 4). What is clear, emotive feelings and sentiments do play an integral part in maintaining marital relations and, especially when pre-marital agreements seem not to be satisfied. Likewise, Aidana's, Aliya's and Dina's biographies are mixtures of rationality with individual aspirations, and sentiments with relational commitments. In their narratives, traditions, either patrilocal co-residence or *betashar*, are combined with their reflections and rationalizations displayed through emotions – shame, affection, humiliation. Moreover, the exchange between people in marriage includes not only material resources but also a sense of partnership, reliance, and reciprocal support.

Both Aidana and Dina agree that for a woman, from a rational perspective, it is inefficient to be married as familial relations require significant short-term investments. However, they emphasize that, contrary to individualization and self-indulgent behaviors, in the long-term, marital relations offer deep emotional connection, supporting each-others' growth, having a sense of belonging, mutual respect and shared responsibilities, burdens. They remain married not because the benefits of marriage outweigh costs of marriage but because of the reasons unique to an individual life. Giddens (1992) argues that marriage is no more primarily

economic and social institution, in modern relationships, individuals prioritize emotional satisfaction and bonds, intimacy and a sense of companionship. When it comes to marriage, love or romantic love can be regarded as a 'behavioral complex composed of a series of specific features or elements' (Greenfield 2016, 363). From women's narratives, one of the key elements of love derive from the idea of 'the one' who has certain features – interestingly, most women tend to repeat the same qualities that they value in their husbands.

According to informants, the qualities of 'the one' include reliability, attentiveness, and accountability; further to this, women emphasized particular acts of love, or the acts of services performed by husbands. Illouz (1997) argues that romantic love and rational planning become intertwined in marital relations. She posits that while love is often perceived as irrational and spontaneous, it is a subject to strategic decision-making and societal influences. When it comes to agency-based love, then Aidana emphasized her husband's acts of services:

> *I have seen husbands who do not take care of their wives. When women are sick, husbands tend to disregard their needs. My husband is highly attentive to my needs, especially when I don't feel well.* (Aidana)

Another informant from Almaty, Arunaz who lives in patrilocal nearby arrangements narrated that:

> *My mother-in-law is a tough woman. She expects that we will take part in every family gathering. It seems like his side, especially in Kazakhstan, always has more demands from kelin, while my natal family expects nothing and is less touchy. What is important, my husband prioritizes my well-being, and he knows that I am not comfortable with Kazakh-things and traditions – he knows that it is stressful for me. He never pushes me to do something that is uncomfortable for me.* (Arunaz)

Leila from Astana emphasized that 'his actions contained no *red flags*, and he was always generous and attentive – he is not an egoistic person'. Aliya from Almaty too noticed that she

consciously monitored her potential husband for ‘red flags’, but even if he allowed for minor mistakes, he was still ‘attentive, kind, honest and transparent’. Nazerke reflected upon her husband’s accountability and added that ‘I am not a good daughter, but he is a very good son’. Other women noted that it was important to observe men in stressful situations and ensure that his reactions were pertinent. Further to this, most women agreed that it is crucial for a man to be able to earn money and provide for a family, especially during maternity leave – women expect their men to earn around 1.000.000 tenge per month to feel secure. Likewise, Tomiris summarized women’s expectations from their husbands by sharing that ‘a sense of purpose’ and providing with ‘security’ in both physical and mental aspects were key qualities of a ‘good husband’ that allowed women to ‘relax’.

Interestingly, some informants cohabited with their future husbands prior to marriage, while others had experiences of joint trips around Kazakhstan and abroad, and a positive experience of cohabitation solidified their intention to sign a marital contract. Furthermore, most of newlyweds have dated prior to marriage for a prolonged period, the span is between one to six years. Despite peoples’ belief and value that they put in marriage, most of the informants did not rush and took some time to test their relationship. Pre-marital relations are tolerated but not fully socially and culturally legitimized, thus informant Dayana from Almaty reflected that they needed to sign a marital contract and legitimize their relationship before relatives to finally move in together as it became inconvenient to arrange overnight meetings.

This research delves into the lives of urban women who have access to social environment and content that ‘promotes values, narratives, and cultural practices that challenge the dominant local family values, such as content showing and legitimizing extramarital affairs and casual sex’, thus pre-marital cohabitation and sex are probable scripts of behavior (Dall’Agnola and Thibault 2021, 1). While the dominant local family values are associated with a conservative approach to sexuality, prevalence of patrilocal living arrangements, women being ‘praised for

their feminine, maternal qualities' and 'unchanged domestic division of labor at home', modern urban Kazakhs mitigate the pressures to conform to 'dominant heteronormative standards' and notions of 'proper female behavior, defined as caring and modest' (Dall'Agnola and Thibault 2021, 3). If conformity is imposed by *uyat*[13], then according to informants, newlyweds' decision-making is shaped by their individual preferences that derive from rationality and sentiments.

1.6. *Statement of the Problem*

Marriage, as a social institution, reconciles a variety of cultural norms and expectations. It acts as a signifier of adulthood, yet newlyweds rarely live socially or economically independently of either of their relatives. Marriage, being predominantly a heteronormative institution, reproduces gender binaries by considering 'men', or 'husbands' and 'women', or 'wives', as 'essentially opposite but complementary by way of reproduction' (Dery 2019, 986). It brings unrelated people together because of a newlywed couple proceeding from their *families of orientation* to their own *family of procreation*.[14] Therefore, the nuclear family of newlyweds is immediately put within an intricate web of extended kin. Within these group affiliations and normative expectations of being 'married', women become 'do it yourself bricoleurs' who '…respond to new and changing situations…from what is easily available to them and has the most social fit' – there, 'traditions are tweaked, invented and reinvented…' (Duncan and Carter 2022, 46).

Marriage creates an intertwined social network consisting of bride's and groom's extended kinship. These relational commitments and experiences, or any other related events in sequence

[13] Uyat translates from Kazakh as 'shame' – it is a 'cultural practice that consists in shaming an individual who has deviated from the norm and done something deemed shameful by the rest of the community. Traditionally used as a form of socio-political self-regulation' (Khegai 2020 in Dall'Agnola and Thibault 2021, 3; Thibault and Caron 2022).

[14] Family of orientation refers to a family in which an individual is born, whereas family of procreation is formed through marriage and does not necessarily infer childbearing, because childbearing remains to be a matter of personal right and choice (Day 2002).

that unravel before and during matrimony create new occupations and choices as to where, when, and how to live. When it comes to the first question of 'where to live', then a newlywed couple is likely to end up in one of the following patterns of post-marital residence: patrilocal, matrilocal, bilocal or neolocal. Whether a married couple lives near or with either bride's or groom's kin group will determine which relatives a couple interacts with and relies upon, or supports and creates or strengthens, specific lifelong bonds. Furthermore, marriage is a legal contract and depending on the quality of relationships, it may act as a financial cushion or provide emotional security, give a sense of marital stability and fulfillment. However, marriage can also turn into a condition that holds women back and limits their opportunities and options. It may set gendered scripts of conduct, enforce expectations around both masculinity and femininity, impose traditional gender roles, where men are obliged to be breadwinners and women caretakers – these may impact decision-making, housework, labor participation and overall satisfaction with life. Both of these scenarios, consequently the outcomes of both pre-marital arrangements and in-marriage household decision-making may be the derivatives of women's ability to define personal goals and act upon them.

In this framework, residence patterns are associated with structural factors that influence the practice of agency, or a rational choice. The 'cognitive dimensions' of agency are inseparable from socio-economic constraints, access to financial resources and assets, gender role attitudes, educational level, labor market participation and filial norms and support needs. The ways in which a newlywed couple decides over 'where' and 'how' to live is the derivative of individuals' approach to their own 'resource management' and rational thinking, on the one hand, and a broader system of kinship relationships, for instance, whether potential co-resident kin are cooperators or competitors. The idea of rational choice suggests that individuals consciously or unconsciously choose between available options that make them as well-off as possible (Pollak 2014). For instance, while marriage offers occupations such as housewife or

mother, an individual woman can in practice decline these options and act outside of traditional certainties, or not – either of biographies would be the outcome of an individual reflexive action. Kinship studies marked a change in focus from viewing family as a 'given form' to the 'elucidation of the process', or the act of 'doing family' every day in a multitude of different ways (Duncan and Carter 2022). While family is no more a 'given form' or a 'thing', 'sex roles' can also be substituted by 'doing gender' – which offers means to escape from falling into binaries.

Family experience varies by gender, age, educational background, economic standing, upbringing, sibling structure, nonetheless, as women get married, their ability to perform the 'freedom agency' becomes correlated with newlyweds' residential patterns (patrilocal, matrilocal, bilocal or neolocal), that in turn create specific affiliation patterns between *families of orientation*, newlyweds' natal kin, and the newlyweds' own *family of procreation*. In other words, depending on the newlyweds' residential patterns, the different types of bonds between the *family of orientation* and *family of procreation* get to be fostered and consolidated. To clarify this point, one might consider the example of a patrilocal family, when newlyweds move in with husband's parents or live in close proximity – there, the lifelong bonds and relationships between parents and sons strengthen which 'reinforces the dominance of male over female kinship ties' (Whyte 2003 in Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 13). While patrilocality is not by itself binding in terms of cohabitation, it is still a basic post-marital set up. It permeates into different domains of newlyweds lives through parents relying on the support of their sons, or an excessive participation in newlyweds' life that propel a 'patrilocal couple conform to culturally and traditionally prescribed norms' (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 4). Importantly, 'the overwhelming majority of known societies show residential and affiliation patterns centered on the male' (Harris 2007, 230).

It is fair to point out that not every woman that ends up in a patrilocal setting faces hardships associated with a 'competitor' kin. Co-residence with kin can benefit women if, for example, relatives are engaged in cooperative childrearing and household management. When it comes to matrilocality, still a nonnormative setup, the reverse interconnection is expected. In other words, the woman's geographic proximity to her natal family places her at a social, and probably, economic advantage as it also may require women contribute to subsistence on a par with their husbands (Cintas-Pena and Garcia Sanjuan 2021). In recent decades, however, more couples seem to end up in neolocal and bilocal residential patterns, that do not follow neither matrilocal nor patrilocal patterns and practical considerations (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018). This trend towards neolocality and bilocality is seen in China, and a similar dynamic is found in Kazakhstan. While I do not conduct a comparative analysis, in both cases, the customs of patrilocal residence and son preference seem resilient and might be correlated with urban newlyweds' tendency to avoid patrilocal arrangements. This suggestion derives from the notion that newlyweds' residential preferences might be derivative of their individual decision-making and needs, rather than traditional certainties and expectations.

1.7. *Statement of the Purpose*

Using women's agency as a tool for analysis, I intend to expose and recognize the variety of urban marital relationships, depending on their patterns of marital residence. The idea of the place of residence and its importance is based upon the assumption that the relationships between people, especially within family, are deeply social and are 'impregnated with collective moralities, ideas and expectations…' (Duncan and Carter 2022, 47). Marital residence is likely to be one of the following: patrilocal, matrilocal, bilocal or neolocal. The residence patterns determine which kin a newlywed couple interacts with and relies upon – this consequently affects the standing or the status within a nuclear family of either wife or

husband. The goal of this research is to provide an examination of women's perceived decision-making agency by using their personal narratives and detailed life experiences. While marriage is an institution with its own ritualized canon, in empirical reality, it is flexible in its form and function. Besides being a socially and culturally recognized union of the two people, asserting the doctrines of patrilineality and descent, standing by the gendered roles, marriage has a sentimental aspect to it.

Individuals experience marriage as an emotion that comprises of daily interactions and arrangements, companionship that all convey through resentment and contentions, joy and reconciliation. I depart from asking what marriage is for women, and instead, I dwell upon how individual Kazakh women do marriage. Relationships do not change in a predictable way, on the contrary, every married coupledom is a flexible unit that finds itself in a continuous, both conscious and unconscious, situational strategizing – by either virtue of living in the cities, or by virtue of having enough mental capacity to negotiate, or by having enough (or not enough) resources to bargain (Lewinson 2006, 92). Having conducted in-person interviews with women, I find myself locating every newlywed couple on a continuum between traditional and the alternative forms of arrangements. Following that, the purpose of this research is to pinpoint the creatives ways in which Kazakh women negotiate their daily married lives, adapt to residence patterns and change them, develop their personal marriage strategies and, eventually, reconcile the traditional moral frameworks with personal goals, inside or outside of the family.

1.8. *Significance of the Study*

The significance of this research lies in its nuanced examination of women's agency within the context of urban Kazakh marriages. This research seeks to illuminate the ways in which newlyweds 'do' family by delving deeply into women's narratives. Examining how individual actors deal with daily uncertainties in the context of intimate and personal relations

depicts how sentiments and economic calculations are not indeed antithetical, on contrary, 'rationality and emotion are co-produced and mutually sustaining' (Illouz and Finkelman 2009, 403). Women tend to employ strategic, reactive, and purposeful agency in circumstances when pre-marital agreements are not satisfied in marriage, or when expectations from marriage do not correspond with the outcomes, or in contexts where the performances of agency become subordinate to relational commitments with extended kin – overall, when costs of marriage seem to outweigh benefits. While Kazakh women tend to endow marriage with an increased value, therefore increasing the price they might pay to stay married, women's decision-making reflects rational behavior that derives from balancing costs and benefits. What was more, women's considerations regarding costs and benefits are different, some value a sense of partnership over financial stability, others prioritize budgeting and order over feelings. In their stories, reflexive consciousness and mental calculations, preferred outcomes or personal utility maximization become entangled with emotional considerations, and sometimes a sense of frustration and shame.

As women reflect upon the rationality of their choices and performances in marriage, in narrative constructions, they also display themselves as emotional doers. The dichotomy between rationality and emotion has been one of the most abiding in sociological theory, yet women's narratives do not sustain it. On the contrary, they disclose how emotion and rationality of choice are entwined in marital and filial relations. When asked about their partners and marriage, women frequently refer to emotions, feelings, and desires as they reinvoke the 'feelings of the heart' and the 'gut'. Narratives are replete with words such as love, a sense of being looked after and taken care of, intuition and 'I felt that we will make it work'. Women's stories might contain narratives where pre-marital agreements are not satisfied, when communication between spouses remains tense and displeasing, or when a woman uses the word 'divorce' as a rhetorical move to introduce new arrangements between

her and her husband. However, women also refer to positive micro-situations with little calculations but containing the 'highest emotional energy payoff' (Illouz and Finkelman 2009, 404). These positive emotional experiences range from mutual understanding and planning, pleasing travelling experiences, sexual gratification, inside jokes and the overall journey that newlyweds have went through.

Regarding identifying women's acts and performances of agency in their storylines, I seek to understand how women reflect on their marital experiences, changes in residence patterns and the ways of 'doing' and 'performing' in marriage? I was looking for how and what women choose to narrate, how they adapt and creatively innovate, or in other words, how they 'act according to habitual rules' or 'discursively examine some elements of tradition'? (Duncan and Carter 2018, 46). Personal narratives and reflexivity reveal the ways in which individuals adapt to 'traditional', create their own marriage strategies and maneuver within the fuzziness of a marital institution and relational commitments. My research probes the contemporary Kazakh family practices by offering an operational account of how different women 'do marriage' in practice - when newlyweds' residential patterns change, or when volatile social web of relations or the economic circumstances of life open possibilities to maneuver, adapt and act.

1.9. *Chapter Summary*

In the next chapter, I discuss the main guiding inquiries and methodologies employed. The third chapter provides an overview of the literature on kinship in Kazakhstan, highlighting the difference between colonial and post-colonial ethnography. The fourth chapter delves into women's narratives and reflections on their marital experiences to demonstrate the wide variety of urban newlyweds' family practices. Chapter five introduces my reflections on my personal experience of being married, emphasizing how circumstantial matrilocal living arrangement resulted in developing deferential agency in marriage. Chapter six further exemplifies interlocutors' interpretative repertoires and discursive patterns pertaining to their marital and

kinship relationships; this chapter also sheds light at the differences in wife's and husbands' responses to the same questions. The next chapter summarizes findings, limitations and contributions of the study.

The overarching theme of this study is that the conventional conceptualization of 'the family' or marriage as a cohesive system or a unitary whole is not exhaustive. Marriage is not a self-evident playbook for men and women that lays out behavioral scripts or personality traits that all individuals comply with.[15] Individuals do not decide to marry based on what is good for the society – 'they weight the costs and benefits of these choices to themselves…' (Waite 1995, 498). Nor do individuals explicitly adhere to commonsense definitions of marriage, family, or gender, and what roles they should commit to and perform. The variability of lived experiences are conditioned by, on the one hand, a 'human error' such as temper, mood, intent, personal emotional background, values, and goals. On the other hand, what marriage is and what it does for women is determined by several structural factors including the access to economic resources and assets, educational level, labor market participation, gender role attitudes, and filial norms and support needs. In concluding this chapter, I return to my opening claims: marriage is not a 'thing', but a process that is bound to the act of doing. It is a continuous process of creative innovation that can be performed via examining and altering some elements of tradition, as well as adapting to traditional certainties. Marriage is an intertwined social network consisting of bride's and groom's extended kinship and these relationships create commitments, and eventually, have an impact on how and where newlyweds live. As women get married, their 'agentive power' becomes correlated with residential patterns. Agency is said to be relational with other, and when newlyweds live close to parents or relatives, or co-reside with them, certain relational commitments may

[15] It is prohibited to register marriage in the Republic of Kazakhstan between persons of the same sex. Therefore, I only consider heterosexual marriage.

prevail over a married couple's decision-making. Nonetheless, agency is not derivative of where a newlywed couple lives, on contrary, an individual actor can change experiences of time and space throughout the family network or in relation to specific actors, depending on several structural factors that include labor force participation, the level of education, possession of valuables such as savings or real estate. Likewise, in a variety of family practices and ways of 'doing' family and marriage, I intend to uncover how women adapt or bargain with circumstances that derive from newlyweds' residence patterns. I do so by delving into individual women's narratives to identify discursive patterns and speech acts, creative adaptations to marital quandaries and strategizing.

Overall, every married coupledom is a flexible unit that consciously or unconsciously finds itself in a continuous situational strategizing – how am I better of? The increased entrenchment of the 'gendered roles' frame, upholding the dominance of male kinship ties over the female, eventually neglects how individuals negotiate, bargain and experience their married lives. This research is focused primarily on Kazakh urban married women and their 'agency' freedom or how, why and when do they act in order to maximize benefits of marriage and minimize its costs. Importantly, it is also committed to understanding how women narrate about their married lives and what speech strategies do they use, what questions do they indeed bring to the table. Since marriage unites a number of unrelated people, I also delve into the perplexities of both spousal and kinship relations, to the degree to which a narrator allows me to. The women's agency will be explored in two interconnected yet separate life periods or domains: the women's introspection of pre-marriage arrangements, and in-marriage household decision-making. This is done using the methods of a reflexive relational autoethnography that is rooted in dialogical anthropology – a 'collaborative witnessing', which is the form of a relational, reflexive autoethnography 'that works to

evocatively tell the experiences of others in shared storytelling and conversation' and a 'thematic discourse analysis'.

2. Chapter II. Research Methodology

2.1. *Introduction*

This chapter delves into the modes of analysis employed to study the relationship between post-marital residence of newlyweds and women's agency in marriage. This chapter is not only an overview of the investigative methods, but also a narrative of how my research strategy has changed and evolved. Likewise, it reveals failures made and lessons learned, it also underlines the pitfalls and the realities of collecting data, conducting interviews, and immersing myself in the field. From the moment I was asked to come up with a list of definite research questions, those have changed as a response to how my marital relationship went. Months have passed, I lived through the experience of being married, case-by-case a seemingly normal and habitual process of 'doing' matrimony transformed my questions from 'macropolitics of matrimony' into a study of women's agency considering newlyweds' residence patterns. A battlefield of competing interests, enforcement of 'what is right' and is expected of me, self-sabotage and expectations were all part of me doing research for the first time while debuting and navigating through married life. The rationale for my research was to reconcile my personal marital experiences with other women's lived realities through bridging the gap between what is expected of urban Kazakh married women and the diversity of how they perform within different family and living arrangements.

When it comes to family and marriage, we do not simply know things, but we also experience and feel them as emotional beings. By sharing the nuances of my personal life with research participants, I maintained honesty and emotional integrity. My transparency was essential for marking my presence in the field as both a married woman and a researcher, which confronted a myth of detached observations and theorizing. Donna Harraway, an American scholar focusing on feminist studies and history of consciousness, in her essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*

(1988) questions the value of objectivity and detached, uninvolved observations in science and argues for a 'situated knowledge' approach. Following her ideas, I attempted to face and confront the myth of detached observations by engaging deeply with informants and acknowledging that the researcher is an active participant in the research process, who cannot escape inherent subjectivity that comes with being a human – it is essential to acknowledge that our backgrounds, experiences, perspectives inevitably shape the research process. Interviews turned into dialogical encounters between me and other married women, which resulted in 'thick descriptions' that either uphold or challenge cultural certainties. This correspondence also yielded a list of definitions and an in-depth understanding of women's agency in marriage, in their own words and ways of 'doing' marriage. Furthermore, noticing how women narrate their marital experiences facilitate our understanding of the discursive role of marriage and family, and relevant 'interpretative repertoires' and discursive patterns. In a sense, the ways in which women tell their stories are indicative of their agency as narratives turn into 'a tool of display' (Finch 2007). Likewise, the dialogic nature of the interviews facilitated 'collective or dialogic emergence' of what women's agency in marriage and family is, in a practical sense and for every individual woman (Grubacic and Vodovnik 2021, 2). At the beginning of the research, I did not intend to turn interviews into conversations, yet I had to adapt to how research participants chose to narrate their lives – it turned out that the intimacy of sharing requires reciprocity. Dialogues and not 'individual consciousness', it seems, is the starting point that makes reflexive thought possible (Grubacic and Vodovnik 2021, 5).

2.2. *Guiding Inquiries*

This research explores several guiding inquiries that shape the analysis of women's agency in marriage, focusing on how residence patterns and proximity to relatives, structural constraints and arrangements influence women's performances and autonomy within their households. The key areas of exploration include women's individual performances or

expressions of agency, family practices among newlyweds as response to structural constraints – such as residence patterns and generational expectations – navigating adaptive family practices within the framework of traditional expectations, and women's personal reflections on these dynamics. Likewise, the research is organized around several investigative themes and the core inquiries include: How do residence patterns shape women's agency in marriage? In what ways do women 'do' family and marriage and how they 'perform' their social roles through everyday practices and negotiations? What adaptive strategies or practices of 'doing' family and marriage do they employ to exercise agency and assert their interests? What discursive patterns and interpretative repertoires do women choose when reflecting on their experiences?

While normative expectations and traditional certainties persist, individuals get to creatively innovate, reinvent, or adapt, both discursively and practically challenge traditional family practices[16]. Likewise, my research questions aim to understand the ways in which women navigate through and adapt in their marriages, depending on the residential patterns they end up in. For me personally, it was unclear whether the institution of marriage is conditioned to accommodate a variety of needs and circumstances, worldviews, and family systems. The decision to study women's agency in marriage was taken for three reasons. First, I wondered if newlyweds' living arrangement made a difference in women's performance of agency in marriage. The second reason was to understand agency and a variety of modern family practices or ways of doing family. Third, I wanted to showcase women's narratives and storytelling to examine how they reflect on marital decision-making, what they choose to narrate about, what they invoke more – rationality, sentiments, or traditions?

[16] By traditional Kazakh family practices, there, I primarily imply patrilocal nearby living arrangement and patrilocal co-residence. This practice is common in patrilineal societies where inheritance is traced through the male line. It is associated with reinforcing male authority and control over family decisions. It often implies that the bride's familial obligations shift towards her husband's family, sometimes at the expense of her relationships and ties to her natal family.

Additionally, I sought to explore themes and factors that shape women's experiences in marriage, gaining insight into the various leverages they use to perform their agency, and adapt to certain structural constraints to assert their interests. The themes include the interplay between rational and emotional decision-making, adapting to and challenging traditional scripts of behavior; women's relationships with relatives, and the quality of those relationships, the personalities of family members – either competitors or cooperators, communicative strategies between family members, women's personal values and expectations from marriage, and strategies of 'performing' different social roles; and women's individual reflections on short term costs and benefits of 'doing' family and marriage. The factors that, arguably, shape women's performance in family and marriage are the following: material assets such as property ownership and financial independence, professional pursuits, access to support networks, whether women have children and her caregiving responsibilities, and change in living arrangements.

I examine key facets of agency by focusing on arrangements and structural constraints that reveal how women navigate personal and relational dimensions within family life and marriage. Within this research, the performance of agency is examined in different relational phases, from pre-marital arrangements to decision-making within marriage. The rationale behind separating pre-marital arrangements from marital decision-making was to depict how women reflect on the dynamic nature of familial relations and marital arrangements, and whether the expectations from marriage are satisfied or not and how newlyweds develop new circumstantial arrangements and family practices. Furthermore, the division into two themes is rooted in the significant shift that occurs post-marriage, where women enter a complex web of kinship relations. This relational network and proximity to relatives, especially co-residential arrangements, play a significant role in shaping newlyweds' daily routines, affecting not only decision-making but also how agency is negotiated and performed.

I conducted a thematic analysis to explore how agency is performed within the context of both pre-marital and marital life, exploring how various structural factors such as education, property ownership, employment status, and proximity to natal kin affect or interact with a bride's agency. Women may draw from these resources to advance their interests – in other words, education and employment might expand women's decision-making horizon, while property ownership or proximity to natal family may offer security that support her autonomy in navigating both pre-marital expectations and in-marriage decision-making. As women transition into marriage and get to be introduced into a broader family network of her husband, the pre-established agreements and the capacity for agency become increasingly correlated with specificities of personal relations between family members, personalities involved and expectations from a bride. Following that, within marriage, agency becomes 'bound' and is performed by means of interacting with a complex network of familial relations, where intergenerational proximity to relatives may bring both support and challenges.

While the presence of an older generation can provide essential support and guidance, it may also lead to various forms of control and interference. In some cases, proximity to kin can be associated with unsolicited advice, or even conflicts that may strain marital relationships. Family members can perform as either cooperators, providing support, or as competitors, challenging or creating tensions. Women's agency in marriage is performed in various ways and is context-specific, thus there is no linear positive relationship between property ownership and proximity to women's family and her perceived sense of stability or autonomy – women creatively draw from their resources, and from what is available for them. Therefore, performance of agency is individual and is shaped by a woman's unique circumstances and may extend beyond the examples below. I focused primarily on how women reflect on their decision-making power in household, budgeting, and family planning, or autonomy to pursue self-projects, such as career development or independent travel. Furthermore, agency can be

performed through negotiation strategies and tactics that help to resolve conflicts and secure a woman's interests, or through reliance on a broader support network – whether from relatives, friends, or community groups.

Women's narratives suggest that getting married implies not simply the change in status from 'dating' to 'married', but the necessity to reconcile the needs of a nuclear family of newlyweds with the expectations from an extended web of kin, and a requirement to adapt and shape relational commitments. Since I was interested in understanding how pre-marital arrangements were satisfied in marriage, and most importantly what discursive patterns are employed by women to reflect on this dynamic, I asked the following: did you and your future husband had pre-marital agreements, expectations of each other pertaining to budgeting, place of residence, number of children, leisure, distribution of monthly family income, household purchases?

To get a glimpse of how women retrospectively view their pre-marital arrangements, I followed up by a general question of whether they succeeded in adhering to their initial 'commitments', arrangements, and pre-marital agreements. All other questions posed during the interviews can be found in the appendices. I would also like to note that, although the questions remained consistent across interviews, women's narratives varied. Some participants elaborated on topics beyond the prepared questions, engaging with the broader themes in ways that reflected their unique personal experiences – these interviews were subsequently analyzed in depth to capture this complexity. For example, the list of questions did not cover the issues related to interpersonal relations between *kelin* and in-laws - however, 15 out of 32 women who had lived in patrilocal arrangements, and particularly those who co-resided with in-laws, narrated in length about the interplay between residence patterns and family dynamics.

Marital agency is influenced by both personal decision-making and the additional structural factor which is newlyweds' residence or proximity to kin. For instance, a patrilocal residence

– where couples live near or with the husband's parents – often aligns with traditional norms, constraining a woman's autonomy due to gendered roles expectations and limited privacy. In contrast, matrilocal arrangements – where couples live near or with the bride's family – can afford women greater social and economic leverages, which may reverse the expectations that are typically seen in patrilocal settings. However, matrilocal residence, and especially co-residence, is rare, and when it occurs, it can be associated with the feelings of displacement and a loss of authority for the husband, fostering alternative dynamics and family practices. Neolocal residence, in which couples establish their own independent households, offers the greatest degree of autonomy and freedom for newlyweds to create and implement new family practices. Interestingly, many women who currently reside in neolocal settings have previously lived in patrilocal arrangements – and the shift to neolocality is usually perceived as a step toward independence. Bilocality – where couple resides in the same city with both sets of parents – often retains a bias towards patrilocality, which means that if newlyweds must co-reside with parents, they will probably end up co-residence patrilocally, reflecting a preference for the norms of patrilineal descent.

Finally, there is a range of structural factors and arrangements that either constrain or support the exercise of agency in marriage and familial relationships. These include, but are not limited to, residence patterns, socio-economic constraints, access to financial resources, property ownership, perceived gender role attitudes, educational level, filial obligations and norms, labor market participation, bargaining skills, and communicative competence. Furthermore, the degree of psychological, emotional, and material separation or independence from each set of parents or relatives also significantly influences a woman's agency within her marriage.

2.3. *Framing the Context*

Research on women's agency, marriage and family practices in Central Asia often emphasizes the persistence of traditional customs and their adaptations to contemporary contexts. Werner (2004) and Handrahan (2004) explored practices such as bride kidnappings, discussing their implications for women's autonomy, and examined the impact of socio-economic changes on family practices, showcasing how modernization interfered into the dynamics of marital relations, while Kandiyoti (1988) introduced the concept of 'patriarchal bargain', highlighting how women navigate within patriarchal family structures. Overall, these studies examine how Central Asian women assert their agency through various forms of resistance and negotiation within patriarchal systems. While existing studies frequently focus on women negotiating within overtly patriarchal systems, my research shifts attention towards middle-class, well-educated Kazakh women. These women often do not perceive their lives as acts of resistance against patriarchal constraints. Instead, they usually navigate their lives with a sense of agency and control that differs from the experiences highlighted in scholarship on Central Asia. Although, urban middle-class women still encounter traditional expectations and norms, they engage in more nuanced and less overtly oppositional forms of negotiation within their marriages and families.

Familiarizing myself with informants' stories required delving into the environment in which women live, build, and manage their families. They live within the urban order and did not have to ascend into the urban 'middle-class' – they already belong to it either by income, education, or ownership of property. This selection bias was intentional as Astana and Almaty are cosmopolitan urban centers that 'due to their global interconnectedness are known to be more tolerant' and agile considering cultural practices (Isaacs 2019 in Dall'Agnola and Thibault 2021, 8). Furthermore, urban landscape is a dynamic social fabric and a unique site for exploring women's marital practices performed through mixing traditional values and

individual self-projects. Cosmopolitan centers offer increased access to education and economic opportunity which translates into greater agency in marriage and marital decision-making processes. Modern aspirations and personal ambitions are not juxtaposed to preserving cultural heritage, traditional expectations such as patrilocal living arrangement and a significant role of extended family remain prevalent. As Bissenova (2017) suggests, urbanization in Kazakhstan facilitates the blending of secular and religious life, allowing urban Kazakhs to navigate and reconcile these often-conflicting spheres. My focus in this research is both on uncovering the ways in which married women perform at the intersection of these worlds and on reconciling the duality between 'traditional' and 'modern', 'individual' and 'the social'.

The lives of informants are shaped by a confluence of traditional values and modern influences, as they balance familial expectations and traditional patriarchal norms with personal aspirations and gender roles. Women's narratives disclose that they tend to prioritize educational aspirations and strategically plan to pursue further studies abroad, they order groceries online as they value their time, they practice yoga, display an interest in mental health awareness and art, or try themselves in entrepreneurship. Some women shared how they received marriage proposals while vacating in France and Georgia, others reflected upon their experiences of living in Indonesia, Turkey, and the United States of America. While I am writing up their narratives, I know that Nazerke and her husband moved from Astana to New-York, changing their residence arrangement from matrilocal to neolocal. While Aidana and her family currently reside in Amsterdam neolocally and have previously lived bilocally in Almaty. Following participant characteristic, it is plausible to suggest that modern Kazakh family practices may change through newlyweds' exposure to Western culture. Women's decision-making horizons tend to be extensive given that they usually receive support from their natal kin, do not disapprove of divorce, are financially independent from their husbands and have an unlimited exposure to information on Internet.

In their narrative constructions, women were open to agree or disagree, discursively examine family practices as they reflected on their marital experiences. From their backgrounds and structural factors, these women cannot be associated with the status of marginalized. However, within the familial realm, the position of young married women in Kazakhstan is linked with practices and expectations around 'appropriate behavior of daughters-in-law' as 'the family institutionalized women's positions as primary caregivers for their husbands and children (Kudaibergenova 2018, 380-381). The 'daughter-in-law' discourse is deeply embedded in traditional family structures, and it is performed through practices and rituals that affect social relations. Scholars highlight that *kelins* are compelled to navigate in space designated by the expectations of humbleness, subservience, and respect (Kamp 2006; McBrien 2017; Kim 2020). These expectations are especially pronounced in patrilocal and coresidential living arrangements where *kelin's* behavior tends to be closely monitored by her husband's family.

While new ideals of nuclear family life are emerging, traditional expectations about marital residence and family roles persist. The rhetoric where a bride or *kelin* joins the husband's family in Kazakh society is deeply rooted in patrilineal and patrilocal cultural norms that prioritize the continuity of the male lineage, it grants husband's family a central role in social and familial structures. This is not unique to Kazakhstan but is common in cultures where patrilineal descent is prioritized. While N/s's husband's brother has a right to share his discontent and assert his values that derive from traditional Kazakh practices, the newlywed couple managed to overcome his insistence by introducing variation to where and how they live or chose to stay. This variation is especially noticeable in how newlyweds manage their relations with relatives, especially in urban settings where living independently becomes more feasible. For instance, even if in Nargiz's narratives her husband's family is referred as 'more traditional', they still opted to live independently in Almaty due to job locations and personal

preferences, diverging from patrilocal traditions. When the newlywed couple visits Astana, and given that the wife's parents live there too, the newlywed couple is flexible and has a choice as to where to stay. Therefore, during their next visits to Astana, they stayed at Nargiz's natal household which was a complete disregard of Nur's expectations. With greater flexibility and mobility, physical co-residence with the husband's family becomes less necessary. Newlyweds can maintain relations with both bride's and groom's relatives regardless of residence patterns, through frequent visits or virtual connection. Thus, Nargiz and her husband Video-Call their respective parents weekly, without prioritizing anyone.

2.4. *Naming My Approach: Autoethnography*

In many ways, my autoethnography tells a story of me doing research on married women while navigating through my own marriage, reflecting on experiences of my great-grand-grandmother Alipa later in the Chapter 3, shaping research strategies to how participants respond to my research interests – with their support and trust, I felt confident in sharing the intricacies of my personal life to get a glimpse into theirs. My research interests and personal experiences synchronized into an epistemological position that centralizes the concept of vulnerability from which I conducted my study. While this research draws data from the interviews, it was conducted from an autoethnographic insider perspective. The claims of an 'insider' derive from my research positionality that reconciles the duality of my presence in the field as both married woman and a researcher. It implies that I was willing to reflect on my personal experience of being married, while sharing and maintaining reciprocity with research participants. I have chosen the framework that naturally played into how I was already doing my research, autoethnographic approach that allowed to reconcile life and academy. The 'auto-turn' has been widely criticized as a 'too late capitalist obsession with the self' (Kornbluh 2023). Nevertheless, it was the 'auto-turn' that did not reject my personal experiences as something inappropriate but embraced them as relevant source that can be used to interpret

what I learn from others. Through this journey of going back and forth between life, theory, and narratives of other married Kazakh women, I unconsciously employed abductive reasoning – it is a continuous process of going back and forth between observations and theories, theories, and methodologies (Morgan 2007). In a sense, autoethnography is 'an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings)' (Hill and Knox 2021, 5).

One of the most important constituents of developing my methodology was coming to terms with who I am in relation to the research and participants - it was my subjectivity that guided the choice of questions, selecting methodology and interpreting data (Ratner 2002). Likewise, my research positionality played into a realm of 'human intersubjectivity' or 'human interobjectivity' – 'a repertoire of knowledge and expectations, or a common culture, that was shared with participants and created an interaction with them' (Jules-Rosette 1975, 21 in Tedlock 1979, 388). Therefore, the autoethnographic course of this study is accompanied by constructionism as the primary theoretical frame, whilst thematic discourse analysis as the methodological framework. The only objection to the choices I have made is about the nature of the confessional genre of my project, and how intricate it is to reconcile 'what is considered known' and how it 'came to be known'; a ruthless censurer within keeps stumbling upon the idea that participants 'instead of letting us hear things in the process of coming to be known, they tell us about the process, and in that sense they are already analogical products or results, differing from the ethnography only in the degree to which monologue is overtly personalized' (Tedlock 1979, 390). Yet the outsider position of me as the researcher, affiliated with the institution, and the insider who belongs to the group under investigation are employed to maintain transparency in 'writing up' women's narratives, so that the narratives are co-created.

My approach to research has changed as a response to how I experienced and navigated my marriage and participants' feedback, as I used my narratives to create trust and reciprocity between me and the research participants. It became evident that without sharing and being open, it will not be possible to engage with other women, renegotiate gendered scripts, appreciate the value of feelings and the processes of daily decision-making. Within this journey, I found that the value of my research derives from blurring the distance between the researcher and the researched through a 'hyper-reflexive process' of doing autoethnography. My 'insider' status makes my 'participation, in the first place, genuine, irrespective of the extent to which I was able to feel 'at home' or make significant connections to other people' (De Graeve 2019, 4). The personal experience of 'being initiated' into a married woman, enhanced my understanding of questions that I was about to ask – the 'understanding that went beyond the rational and cognitive to also include learning that took place through emotions and the body' (De Graeve 2019, 5).

When I was asked to come up with a definite list of research questions, I was unmarried and did not have a thorough insight into what this institution does. This is not to say that today, having been married for two years, I sufficiently understand the nature of it - yet undergoing this life transition granted me an access to the field of knowledge, that was once implicit. Earlier, marriage seemed self-evident, a 'thing' that most of adults come to do, it created a social network between once estranged families, it offered roles that ought to be embraced – a mystical 'stressor' event that promised love, support and care. Subsequently, as I introduced myself to scholarship on kinship, family studies and marriage, it became evident that my own marital experience was not represented in the key literature. Marriage turned out to be different than what I have expected, it did not come with neither a script nor a schedule to follow through.

My personal subjectivity that derives from the recent experience of getting married, still fresh in the memory was instrumental in empathizing with women and understanding them.

From this sensemaking perspective, it was inspiring and fascinating to delve into every woman's narrative, make notes of their choice of language and tone of voice, notice patterns, and ask questions with an unfeigned interest. It comes as no surprise that my engagement and marriage are epiphanies or as Adams et al (2015, 47) called it in their book 'transformative moments and realizations that significantly shape or alter the (perceived) course of our lives'. These experiences provoked sensemaking at the individual level, as this process is often 'triggered when significant (and one might argue, insignificant) events are experienced' (Weick 1995, 132). Repositioning personal experiences as central in mainstream studies that revolve around bargaining with patriarchy, the institute of *kelin* and a pervasive discourse on subordination required me to doubt all the normative understandings around family and marriage. It might be unprofessional to confess how my research strategies and methodologies, throughout this journey, were responsive to how I 'did' my marriage, or what I learned from research participants – however, this was the process indeed.

Developing research methodology is an ongoing and an unsettling process, realistically speaking, it is never 'hygienic research' (Kelly et al 1994, 45-46). Questions and approaches did transform under external stimulus and the core one was the change of my marital status. From April 2022, I was able to consciously use my personal experience of getting married as its own data to describe and rely on, to eventually ask pinpoint questions, analyze, and understand others' cultural experiences. In a variety of qualitative research methods, I stick by 'Analytic Autoethnography' and 'Dialogic Autoethnography' that suit those researchers who are interested in 'narrative descriptions and evocations of the richly textured nature of lived experience' as 'Autoethnographers seek to craft compelling tales that shed light on particular phenomena encountered in the research scene' (Hill and Knox 2021, 6). While I name my approach 'Analytic Autoethnography', which is the method for reflexive research, I do not intend to rely on my personal self-reflections as the basis for describing or critiquing values

and traditions, practices, and experiences. To be more specific, I would say that my experience will be included into 'accounts of the scene being studied' through interrogation and integration of it into the experiences and narratives of others (Richardson 2005).

For the most part, my personal story was useful in creating and maintaining a relationship between me and research participants, before and during interviews. Probably, it was not my personal marital experience, but the ability to share and empathize that enabled me to sustain a trusting relationship that eventually nourished the process of data gathering and analysis. In other words, self-reflections are used 'in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional…and cultural praxis (i.e. action, performance, accomplishment) (Hill and Knox 2021, 5). Besides relying on a narrative approach or a self-narrative within a social context, my personal experience acts as the facilitator of trust and comfort between me and the individuals who will contribute to interviews and participant observation.

2.5. *Entwined Research Positionality*

In this section, I attempt to draw contours of how my research positionality played into conducting interviews. To reconcile my research positionality with research interests and correspondence with participants, I must respond to *Who am I* in relation to research? Within interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, a researcher and participants interactively connect to simultaneously create and shape data as interviews proceed (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). Symbols, meanings, and discursive patterns get to be discursively constructed within a process of a reflexive exchange between a researcher, who is open about his positionality and intent, and participants. In seeking for meanings and narratives, I remained open about who I am and how my research has changed in response to my personal life. My personal reflections about marital experiences, matrilocal living arrangements, my parents performing as competitors, while husband's parents performing as cooperators, balancing between marriage as an institution, marriage as a lived experience, and marriage as the research interest.

Given the degree of my emotional immersion and a set of my personal social identities that include age, gender, educational level, background, institutional affiliation and marital status, my researcher's positionality can be referred to as an entwined positionality. Weick (1995), building on Unger's (1987) formative context and De Rond et al.'s (2019) embodied sensemaking, defined entwined positionality as 'an interpretive space which takes into consideration the combined role of the researcher's sensory capabilities and elements of the formative context in providing frames of reference for sensemaking'. As interviews proceeded, I gathered knowledge that was used for academic purposes, yet I also accumulated wisdoms to be employed in my personal life. This was an ongoing process of learning through interaction, internalization of contradictory beliefs through dialectical encounters, and sharing – and this journey was shared with participants without sugar-coating. In a sense, when my personal life got complicated, almost ruined, as my parents insisted on divorce, it was the research that allowed me to keep on searching for answers and not give up.

To be more elaborate and specific, it was the research that precluded me once from pressing the 'divorce' button on the Electronic-government (E-government) portal that makes it, sometimes, irresistibly easy to end matrimony online. Being able to observe and study personal lives of other women offered me new ways of learning-by-doing, yet it was critical to be careful with how my personal marital experience might influence interpretive processes. Likewise, coming to terms with my research positionality means to take responsibility over my 'sensory capabilities in contributing to sensemaking' (Weick 1995, 2).

I did not share much with participants about my occasional visits to E-government's divorce section, while mentally juggling between leaving and staying. However, a number of women shared how they overcome their own prejudice and anxiety over potential divorce, and became more open to the idea that if arrangements would not be satisfied, they will suggest divorce as a way out. Aliya from Astana noted that within 1,4 years of marriage she settled and became

comfortable with the possibility of divorce, if living arrangements would not change from patrilocal co-residence to whatever residence. Leila from Astana shared that during arguments it is her who suggests divorce, while Madina filed for divorce due to their inability to overcome patrilocal-co-residence's aftermath and ruined relations with her husband's parents, the mother more specifically. Ainur recalled how she was lost in thought about divorce just within the first month of marriage, as she explained 'just because of his mother' – since they too co-resided with her husband's family. Aidana, who co-resides with her husband's parents in Astana, visibly blushed for her recurring thoughts about divorce as she noted that 'it felt like thinking about divorce at your wedding day'. She is saving money for her own apartment, while her husband does not contribute and find co-residence with his parents comfortable, this too strains Aidana as it 'feels like betrayal' – she is already preparing to buy an apartment where she could live if divorce would materialize.

Importantly, neither of these women filed for divorce as they found reasons why they should stay and how to employ different strategies to make their marriages work. Aliya and Aidana, cooperatively with their mothers, are saving money for their own apartments without their husbands' help, while Madina and Ainur insisted on moving out, and Leila developing self-regulatory mechanism not to mention 'divorce' during arguments. Given that I conducted a thematic discourse analysis, the recurring words such as 'divorce', or 'he helps me' (on pomogaet mne), were subject to a text search and identifying the contexts in which these words were spoken – recurrent phrases and sentences were coded respectively.

Every encounter with a research participant enriched my understanding of marital experiences as they introduced me into different aspects of it, and modes of 'doing' family. Prior to every consecutive encounter, I had already been able to identify the directions in which an interview might go. While interviews usually started ceremoniously with me re-introducing participants into research objectives, ethical considerations, consent forms and the necessity to

record the process, gradually interviews turned into animated conversations. The procedures pertaining to the interviews were communicated by me as a researcher or a student associated with an institution, yet when we turned to the questions, I appeared as an active listener and a woman who performs a similar socio-cultural role of a daughter, wife and *kelin*. The difference the participants and I is that I was responsible for recording, making notes, directing the interviews, and taking care of their confidentiality.

2.6. *Research Positionality During Interviews*

While I had to keep in mind that I am not a friend nor an assignee of psychological support, I provided participants with a freedom to choose their own style of narration, tempo and tone, choice of language and words. A considerable effort and attention to the process was made to ensure that participants feel supported and understood. Therefore, I offered to meet up for the interviews within the context of my apartment, I prepared snacks and coffee, or tea, to create a feeling of comfort and safety. This strategy was intentional as it allowed participants to have a glimpse into how my life looks like, how my household is managed and what, practically, our kitchen has to offer. Some of the interviews were conducted via online meetings, others in coffee houses and restaurants, I occasionally ended up in respondents' apartments too. Without face-to-face meetings, it was complicated to create a connection, yet these interactions turned out to be more focused on the exact questions from the list. Importantly, the degree to which a participant was open, which derives from personal peculiarities of the character, mitigated the form and the context of an interview.

My inevitable presence in the field and during the interviews was communicated by means of attentive and thoughtful listening and sharing, whenever necessary. Since I was not hesitant to share the autoethnographic nature of my research, participants were eager to ask questions, turn interviews into conversations, pause whenever they felt necessary, grab a coffee while I was making my notes. By the end, a couple of women pointed out the therapeutic nature of the

interviews and a high quality of self-reflections. I suggest that this sense of freedom and release stems from the fact that they were not expected to perform in a certain way, they were free to express without being responsible for what is said or written down, nor did they feel judged by me. It was critical to maintain that, as a researcher, I am aware of the concept of vulnerability – emotional detachment that is required to write an academic work was not an option. While we went through similar experiences, some narratives confirmed my expectations, while others suggested different perspectives. Interestingly, one of the participants shared that she used the list of research questions to initiate a dialogue with her husband, asking questions from the list allowed her to structurally address unresolved issues.

While I find my research questions simple and straightforward, they turned out to be indicative of my membership in a particular cultural grouping, as well as reflect internalized norms and values. My focus on residence patterns, the expectations for brides to integrate into their husband's family, a common pattern for newlyweds to receive support from their relatives reflect widely help Kazakh cultural norms. By examining concepts like co-residence as means of fostering unity, or the practice of receiving family support, my questions reveal a customary understanding of Kazakh kinship dynamics that may differ from individualistic perspectives that are common in other societies. Thus, for instance, it was important to ask what their parents' response to proposal was, or who helped to buy an apartment, whom do newlyweds approach when advice is needed, what responsibilities do women and husbands have pertaining to household management, what are the expectations between the two, and were pre-marital arrangements satisfied in marriage or not? In creating the list of questions, I used myself as an instrument by putting my intimate world on paper, without details but with enough depth to make questions relevant, so that women might use it as a template to reflect on their lives.

Given that within this study I performed a dual role of a researcher and a woman/wife, I had to be carefully self-monitoring my expectations and assumptions, thus I attempted to

schematically categorize the narratives into groups. Stories can be divided into those, where women narrate about themselves, their objections and goals, their feelings and strategizing and those, where the relations with kin seem central. While the interview questions were consistent, the narratives varied, as each women chose to shape her story around the themes that she personally found relevant and meaningful. For instance, some women with children did not focus on childcare, instead choosing to emphasize their professional goals. When such patterns emerge, I similarly prioritize what participants themselves chose to highlight – this approach allowed women's narratives and reflections to guide the analysis.

Furthermore, it is evident that narratives can be grouped into three categories: positive reflections and satisfaction with marital life, negative reflections and mentioning divorce, and lastly those who maintained a canvas of 'appropriate' and boundaries that did not allow me to reinvigorate the conversation. Accordingly, I followed participants' tempo and respected their boundaries. Either her resistance or husbands' unwillingness to respond to the questionnaire were regarded as acts and performances of agency as well. For instance, some women expressed reluctance to invite their husbands to participate as they explained how men are not interested in such matters, and a possible response would likely be 'it is irrelevant, I have things to do' or 'do not even start…'. There, a narrative on men being uninterested in insignificant 'things' is also indicative of common 'interpretative repertoires'. Nonetheless, 17 out of 32 husbands agreed to participate and some of them paid great attention and responded in detail to the questionnaire – I suggest that both the act of husbands' participation and their responses can yield a more nuanced understanding of what women's agency in marriage is.

Some interviews shed more light on strategizing and negotiations, others focused on conflict management and regulating relations with partner and kin. There are newlyweds who moved numerously and therefore can reflect on how change of residence patterns affect the relationship dynamic within their nuclear family, as well as women's personal decision-making

and a sense of comfort and satisfaction. These narratives tend to confirm that neolocal living arrangements help newlyweds to come up with their own scripts of doing family, which gives women more space to maneuver in daily strategizing. I did not depart much from the list of interview questions, yet each woman took me on different pathways. Some of them delve into how they adjusted household management, others reflected on patriarchal norms, while a group of women focused on why they chose these men to be their husband.

There are women who narrated about the ways in which they employed different strategies to maintain marriage, yet they kept repeating how their 'rose-colored glasses' shattered, and they are now open to consider divorce – the stories told in tears and voice trembling. This idiom appeared several times in unrelated narratives of different women, I was attentive to such repetitions as they later organize into lists of themes and systems of meanings. In contrast, there are women who made sure that during pre-marital negotiations, the implementable goals were set, and a concerned party was notified so that nothing intermingled into the realization of personal self-projects – these are newlyweds who put effort into building and maintaining non-accusatory and supportive communication. Throughout the interviews, I observed myself consumed by critical reflections that yielded 'revised meanings and symbols' (Mezirow 1990). It turns out that the institution of marriage is a façade that stows away various systems of contradictory meanings, perspectives and levels of analysis, nuanced feelings that cannot be categorized into 'traditional' nor 'modern', 'cultural' nor 'imagined', 'resistance' nor 'subordination' – it is rather a playground where individuals get to perform their situational strategizing, both consciously and unconsciously.

2.7. *Limitations*

In this section I invoke the main limitations pertaining to employing autoethnographic approach in social science research. Firstly, I touch upon the critique of the 'auto-turn' trend and reflect on my research positionality. Secondly, I go over the power imbalance between a

research participant, who narrates a story, and a researcher who writes up a story. Thirdly, I go over the difficulties of coming up with the research group, and the intricacies of communicating with research participants and noticing the relational couple dynamics, even during the preparations for the interviews.

In making claims of any kind about my research positionality I stand against the idea of objectivity because to be objective means to liberate oneself from personal biases. While autoethnographic methods remain contentious, I argue that the academic 'auto-turn' completes and clarifies the fuzzy zone between real life experiences and research. There is a contentious debate around taking the 'auto-turn', or autoethnographic methodologies, because of the ways in which researcher's personal and intimate experiences are incorporated into the participants' narratives, and the overall research and writing. This 'auto-turn' has been criticized as 'self-legitimating', particularistic with 'its gushing form and unargumentative beat' (Kornbluh 2023, 273).

One of the latest critiques of the autoethnographic turn is described in Kornbluh's (2023) '*Immediacy*'. She explicates how the 'auto-turn' incites contemporary social ills within a 'bustling market – one that capaciously promotes manifestism as internal redress of its own depravities, and flow as dissolution of its own contradictions' - she continues by exemplifying how 'auto-theory dissolves medium, format, boundary in pursuit of presence and hyperexposure' (Kornbluh 2023, 218-219). However, an autoethnographic approach that reveals the researcher's presence and the insider knowledge of the field, has been embraced by a number of research fields associated with collective struggles and activism (De Graeve 2024). I personally stand in the favor of 'I' in qualitative autoethnographic methodologies, as it allows for the researcher to artistically and analytically reconcile the self with others, culture and social research, which eventually negates the distance between insider and outsider. As Adams and others write in their book *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, the

vulnerable reflections on lived experiences '…provide insights into social experiences that we cannot observe directly…', 'these experiences cannot be recreated in an experiment'; there, autoethnographers 'treat research as a socially – and relationally – conscious act, and attempt to cultivate reciprocal relationships with the participants, readers, and audiences' (Adams et al 2014, 36).

Leslie Rebecca Bloom, an American scholar specializing in women's and gender studies, has written extensively on feminist research methodologies, narrative inquiry, and the role of the researcher in qualitative research; particularly in her book *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation* (1998), she suggests that from the moment a story is told, it becomes a researcher's tool to write-up and represent a participant. It means that an informant loses a hold of his or her own story and conveys the rights to a researcher, who may or may not exploit the nature of this relationship. I was aware of the power imbalance, and it was the power that I aspired to minimize. I did so by means of reflecting on how my identity, belief system and experiences, relationships with each individual narrator influence my reporting of the 'findings'. I also encouraged dialogic interactions during the interviews. While I did ask leading questions, I also tried to leave a room for alternative world views so that every informant had an opportunity to change the track of the interview and narrate on what is indeed important in a particular story.

When it comes to the research participants, then they are a select group of middle-class urban Kazakh newlyweds, rather than a representative sample of the population. Following that, this sample has its limits. Firstly, it is unclear how to operationalize 'middle class' in Kazakhstan. Given that 'most economists agree that middle class status is characterized by a relatively high income, there is no consensus on where to draw the line, since living above the poverty line does not necessarily ensure middle-class status' (Pittau and Zelli 2018, 2). Then, what concept of the 'middle class' is most applicable within the scope of this research? I mostly

refer to Pittau and Zelli's (2018, 3) estimation of country-specific thresholds for identifying the Kazakhstani middle class. They do so through the method of an absolute income approach, which is based on 'how Kazakhstan citizens perceive their own social status relative to their reported income'. Besides, the 'vulnerability-poverty approach' where individuals 'are not vulnerable to falling into poverty in a few years' time helps to group a population into five categories: low-income, not poor, middle class, top-middle class and prosperous (Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez 2014 in Pittau and Zelli 2018, 6).

Likewise, middle class can be characterized as those who do not encounter any difficulties purchasing main and non-main food products and services, 'but have insufficient funds to purchase additional dwellings' such as loan free apartments, houses, and expensive cars. Whilst top-middle class 'consume high-quality products, live in comfortable conditions', are employed, or have 'income-generating business and/or property' (Pittau and Zelli 2018, 8). Besides income indicators, there are other demographic characteristics that help to understand whether a narrator belongs in the middle class or not. On the one hand, it is the combination of social and cultural capital, inheritance, and wealth, living in safe areas, education, and earnings. On the other hand, the ownership of an apartment/home and/or a car, the type of employment, monthly costs of living or spendings on optional and luxury items. For the sake of the following research, I stick with Pittau and Zelli's (2018) definition of the middle class that includes both middle class and top-middle class stratifications. Nonetheless, when a potential informant displayed interest in participating in the research but did not satisfy the criteria for 'middle class', I rarely denied the inquiry. Primarily because the value of intent, honesty, and willingness to share outweigh the value of structural factors.

Besides interviewing wives, my attempts to collect data included surveying husbands. I find it considerably important to include husbands' voices since a woman's experience of matrimony is likely to be influenced, or sometimes even shaped, by her spousal relationship.

Husbands' responses were meant to build upon the women's narratives to yield a better understanding of the family dynamics. However, while I recruited women directly by myself or through common circle of female acquaintances, I did not have a direct access to men. After a series of husbands' refusals to participate in the study, I left the 'husband survey' as the open invitation, yet I took every opportunity to survey men as well. All the women whom I interviewed were survey respondents, however, the men whom I surveyed were not interviewed. To sum up, when it comes to surveying husbands, I observed three different scenarios. First, some women were confident that, even in the case of refusal to participate, they will be able to convince their husbands otherwise – in other words, these women displayed a capacity to persuade. Second, other women were willing to offer their husbands to participate, but men refused, and women had no leverages or interest in over-persuading him. Third, another group of women immediately refused to invite their husbands to be involved with the research, as women were convinced that their partners would surely reject the idea and, probably, make fun of the decision to participate herself. From these different scenarios, it was relatively easy to distinguish a certain pattern and group couples accordingly. There are newlyweds who cooperatively found it interesting to participate, others find ways to cooperate - there, a woman was the initiator and used different leverages to persuade her husband, or he himself was genuinely engaged and interested in the process. There is also a group, where husbands did not approve of participation yet did not halt women's involvement. I am unable to provide precise figures on participants' husbands' personal sentiments, but I can confirm that, among 32 husbands, 17 chose to complete the questionnaire.

Given that the appropriateness and the degree of 'emotional immersion – and reporting on it' has been widely debated and criticized among social scientists, I was careful to stick to ethical strategies. Being ethical required me to regularly turn to moral distinctions between right and wrong. It meant not to ask questions that appeared to make participants

uncomfortable, to make sure that participants are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and have familiarized themselves with informed consent forms, to be attentive and responsive to participants' non-verbal communication and keep a distance if I found that my suggestive questions create a tension. I attempted to mitigate these tensions by maintaining that participation was voluntary and all the participants are adults who received interview questions prior to our meeting, and they had freedom to withdraw from the study at any time.

Knowing is achieved through various mechanisms and, in many ways, my way of 'knowing' women's agency and its correlation with residence patterns was influenced by my various social identities such as gender, nationality, age, marital status, personal and historical background, geographical location, intellectual predispositions and even institutional affiliation (Chiseri-Strater 1996, 147). It seems impossible to reconcile the different combinations of one's social identities, yet I attempted to contextually situate them prior and during every interview. My social identities that I find relevant to this research and that make up my entwined research positionality that affect the process of sensemaking can be grouped into three categories. The first category is comprised of my personal attributes such as age, gender, nationality, marital status, class, residence, education. The second frame of reference relates to me as a researcher, student who is affiliated with an institution. The last category touches upon my reflections on marital experiences as a woman, partner, daughter, granddaughter and *kelin*. On the one hand, these three categories were instrumental for introducing myself to research participants, and it build their sensemaking perspectives of me. On the other hand, these social identities were reflected upon and comprise different frames of reference that are employed to interpret my personal experiences (Weick 1995).

My institutional affiliation with Nazarbayev University was usually the first identity to which potential participants were introduced. Given its prestige, rankings and, arguably, innovative research endeavors, it facilitated trust on behalf of potential participants. While

institutional affiliation suggests certain interpretive frames, I was given freedom to ask questions that I personally find important and conduct research, within ethical regulations, yet in the ways I find appropriate. It is critical to acknowledge that this research derives from a place of privilege as it is conducted in frontier cities such as Astana and Almaty, and among urban middle class newlyweds, it surely affects 'what becomes salient and what gets suppressed' (Maher and Tetrault 1993).

I suggest that while institutional affiliation and my researcher's identity formalized relations with participants, it nonetheless created a power structure that could possibly lead to power imbalance. When it comes to research, from the moment a story is shared, it turns into a researcher's tool to write-up and re-create participants' narratives on paper. It means that a narrator renders her personal story to convey the rights to a researcher (Bloom 1998; Wilkinson 1999). Since I was aware of this potential power imbalance, I was consciously immersing myself in correspondence with every individual participant to build trust and reciprocity, I did not only receive, but also shared personal experiences, fieldnotes and findings, if necessary.

Moreover, I relied upon my identity as a 27-year-old married Kazakh woman to convey how similar we are, even if I am there to record the interview and ask questions, while a participant is being observed. While my age, gender, marital status, and background do not represent nor reflect the experiences of all the Kazakh married women, these personal attributes were used as tools for adopting an 'inward perspective and approach sensemaking as am embodied activity, illuminating the researcher's body as a tool in the sensemaking process' (De Rond et al 2019, 18). In turn, my age, gender, marital status, geographical location, and economic, historical backgrounds predetermined my emotional recall for women's questions, marriage, agency, and performance of kinship. My personal attributes as social identity derive from wider social structures that shape one's frames of reference, as they comprise researcher's

sensory capabilities as well as ‘emotional propellers’, and ‘an internal grasp of the social world which underpins their responses to experiences’ (Bolade-Ogunfodun 2022, 5).

The explanatory concepts and contextual factors such as geographic proximity to either sets of relatives derive from my reflexivity, as given my marital experience, I found it instrumental in learning how women might act and perform. This is not to argue that my expectations or assumptions were supported by the narratives of all the other women. My reflections were only a starting point that were meant to initiate conversations to make sense of the environment, while influencing the research process and how I interpret what I observe and learn. Likewise, my identity helped to recognize the limits of scientific knowledge as ‘the way I make sense of these experiences is not the only way to make sense of them’ – a researcher is also an audience for her or his own experiences (Adams et al 2015, 30).

2.8. *Summary of the proposed research*

While providing security, a larger net worth, fulfillment and a sense of marital stability, marriage can also turn into a condition that holds women back and limits their opportunities and options. Both scenarios, consequently the outcomes of both pre-marital arrangements and household decision-making, are the derivatives of women’s ability to define personal goals and act upon them. In other words, women can improve their individual well-being by means of performing the ‘agency freedom’ or the ‘freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides she/he should achieve’, as she has ‘the capacity to make decisions about one’s own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear’ (Amartya 1985, 80; Kabeer 1999, 436; Klugman 2014). In other words, investigating women's agency means getting a closer look at the dynamics of women's empowerment here in Kazakhstan and understanding the social organization and family practices of modern urban Kazakhs.

I intend to investigate the degree to which newlywed's residential patterns (patrilocality, matrilocality, neolocality and bilocality) affect Kazakh women's agency within marriage (and during pre-marital arrangements. As interviews went by, I realized that it is crucial to pay attention to how women narrate their lives, and besides their various performances of agency, I took notice of what words are used, in which voice and tempo, and how they form into patterns. Interviews revealed that newlyweds rarely stick to one residential pattern; out of 32 interviewed women, 16 noted that had moved and changed their place of residence because of parents' relocation. It means that while my research can trace the dynamic of pre-marital agency and in-marital agency, it can also shed light on how women reflect on their performances of agency in response to how their living arrangements had changed.

In this research, besides a fourfold typology of post-marital residence patterns (patrilocality, matrilocality, bilocality and neolocality), I also differentiate between co-residence and nearby residence as sharing a household, rather than simply living in close proximity, has a significant effect on power dynamics within a coupledom. When it comes to patrilocality, when a newlyweds move in with husband's parents or live in a close proximity, the lifelong bonds and relationships between the parents and their sons strengthen which 'reinforces the dominance of male over female kinship ties' (Greenhalgh 1985; Whyte 2003 in Gruijters and Ermisch 2018). This may include parents relying on the support of their sons or an excessive participation in newlyweds' life that propel a 'patrilocal couple conform to culturally and traditionally prescribed norms' (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 4). Importantly, 'the overwhelming majority of known societies show residential and affiliation patterns centered on the male' (Harris 2007, 230). When it comes to matrilocality, still a nonnormative behavior, the reverse interconnection is expected. In other words, the woman's geographic proximity to her natal family places her at a social, and probably, economic advantage; yet it may also require women contribute to subsistence on a par with their husbands (Cintas-Pena and Garcia Sanjuan 2021).

In recent decades, however, more couples seem to end up in neolocal and bilocal residential patterns - that do not follow neither matrilocal nor patrilocal patterns and practical considerations. Neolocal post-marital residence, living far from both sets of parents or relatives, is expected among urban elites in industrial societies, it is common among newlyweds who are economically and emotionally independent from parents and relatives, and have less need for support. Bilocal residence, a living arrangement where respective parents or relatives live in the same city as the newlyweds, is associated with alternating between hers and his parents or relatives. There newlyweds juggle between relatives from her and his side; this residence pattern may be indicative of power dynamic within a couple, as they will invest more focus and time into relatives of a more authoritative partner. Bilocal residence is also related to those newlyweds who co-reside patrilocally, or matrilocally, and live in proximity to her parents, or his. In bilocal residence, neither wife nor husband seem disadvantaged as they can rely on support from both groups of relatives.

Nonetheless, in practice, individuals who have similar post-marital living arrangement, would have different experiences. A bilocal couple, who lives on their own but close to both sets of relatives, is different from a couple who co-resides patrilocally and, for instance, 15 minutes away from her kin. Both of these couples are considered bilocal, yet I will differentiate them because co-residence is a significant 'condition' that predetermines sharing household and its management, it surely affects newlyweds decision-making horizon.

Importantly, residence patterns are rarely constant, newlyweds tend to resettle, and the reasons for movement are different. The reasons vary from property ownership to career plans, and individual relations between coupledom and their respective kin. Most of the participants noted that, while it is reasonable to co-reside patrilocally for the first few months or a year, it is essential to move out. In turn, the decision to move out or relocate to a different city may be

associated with how relatives perform, as they can be either cooperators or competitors. Personal relations, not infrequently, are indicative of whether newlyweds would move or stay.

2.9. *Sampling and Participants' Characteristics*

The process of selecting a group from which data was collected was straightforward. I chose a group that somewhat resembles myself – urban, middle-class, Kazakh women. Primarily, because of the logistical ease of access, but also because previous studies have often overlooked this demographic, focusing instead on rural or lower-income populations. The choice of urban, middle-class Kazakh informants is deeply rooted in the unique socio-cultural landscape of Kazakhstan. Cosmopolitan centers like Astana and Almaty are microcosms of rapid socio-economic change, where middle-class families find themselves balancing long-standing traditional practices with contemporary and demanding lifestyles. Middle-class participants typically have access to higher education, stable employment, and an exposure to global cultural trends, which influences their performances of individual agency and family practices – by focusing on this demographic, this research captures family practices that range from adhering to traditional norms to those that actively challenge and redefine them.

Further to this, choosing participants from urban middle-class has practical considerations. First, my own positionality as an urban middle-class Kazakh woman provides basis for trust, reciprocity, and rapport with informants, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the data collected. Second, urban participants are more likely to engage with academic research and narrate their experiences in ways that are accessible and insightful for qualitative research (Bredal 2024). The logistical ease of accessing informants through community and urban networks, social media ensured effective data collection. Third, from a theoretical perspective, urban middle-class allows for examining the concepts such as bricolage of 'tradition' and modernity, and the interplay between 'individual' and 'the social'. Furthermore, I focused primarily on Kazakh married women because it enables an examination of patrilineal norms

and patrilocal residence patterns that are specific to Kazakh culture, and other patrilineal societies. By focusing on this group, I intended to reveal how Kazakh urban women navigate intersections of traditions and modernity while shaping their family practices.

I relied upon convenience sampling and a voluntary response sampling. It means that I recruited research participants among my friends by means of a direct inquiry. To overcome a selection and sampling bias, I also recruited through social media which created an opportunity for potential participants to volunteer, if they found it appealing. It is important to note that, via Instagram advertising, I did not explicitly invite women to take part in my research. Instead, I used my Instagram Stories to narrate about my personal marital experiences, touching upon quite sensitive issues while being open and non-offensive as I also shared how my PhD Thesis went. This created an imagery of an invested researcher who cares about marriage and the institution of family, and who experiences similar things as other married women. What was unknown for my viewers is how is it possible to turn daily lives and basic household affairs into academic research, and therefore some of the research participants showed interest in participating. Once women got in touch with me, I emailed them research questions, informed consent forms, and was willing to introduce them into my research project. I also requested my friends to occasionally share about my research in their circle of acquaintances and unobtrusively ask if they are willing to participate or not, without a necessity to decline my personal offer.

Regarding research participants, several patterns can be observed. While participants live in various residence patterns, most commonly newlyweds reside bilocally – 12 married couples. Bilocal living arrangement is the most common, followed by neolocal and patrilocal residence patterns – most participants have not changed their residence patterns, and majority do not currently co-reside with parents. Most participants are in their mid to late 20s, a significant number of women are employed, and 21 out of 32 women do not have children.

Below, Table 2 gives an overview of research participants in Almaty, their characteristics and general information and Table 3 displays characteristics of participants in Astana. Importantly, to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the women who participated in this study and did not wish their real names disclosed, I have assigned pseudonyms – this approach aligns with ethical standards.

Table 2. Participants Characteristics, Almaty

Name/Code	Age	Education /Employment (yes/no)	Years Married/ Children (yes/no)	Residence Pattern	Change of Residence	Husband's Responses	Co-residence (Yes/No)
1. Nargiz	27	Graduate/Yes	2 years/ No	Neolocal	No	Yes	No
2. Gaukhar	25	Graduate/Yes	4 years/ No	Bilocal	Patrilocal to Bilocal	No	Yes
3. Gulnaz	27	Undergrad/Yes	5 years/ Yes	Neolocal	No	No	No
4. Aidana	27	Graduate/Yes	2 years/Yes	Bilocal	Patrilocal to Bilocal	No	No
5. Dina	27	Undergrad/Yes	3,5 years/Yes	Bilocal	No	Yes	No
6. Arunaz	27	Undergrad/Yes	2 years/No	Patrilocal	No	Yes	No
7. Dayana	28	Graduate/No	2 years/Yes	Patrilocal	No	Yes	No
8. Tomiris	24	Graduate/Yes	1 week /No	Neolocal	No	Yes	No
9. Leila	26	Undergrad/Yes	2 years/No	Matrilocal	No	Yes	No
10. Aliya	27	Undergrad/Yes	4,5 years/No	Matrilocal	Yes	No	Yes, matrilocal
11. Sabina	27	Undergrad/Yes	1year/No	Bilocal	No	Yes	No

Table 3. Participants Characteristics, Astana

Name/Code	Age	Education/ Employment (yes/no)	Years Married/ Children (yes/no)	Residence Pattern	Change of Residence	Husband's Responses	Co-residence (Yes/No)
1. Aliya	22	Undergrad/Yes	1,4 years/No	Bilocal	No	No	Yes, patrilocal

2. Assel	26	Graduate/Yes	2 years/No	Neolocal	Yes (from matrilocal)	Yes	No
3. Leila	27	Graduate/No	7 months/No	Bilocal	No	Yes	No
4. Aya	26	Undergrad/Yes	5 years/Yes	Bilocal	Yes	No	Yes, patrilocal
5. Madina	28	Undergrad/Yes	1,5 years/No	Neolocal	Yes	Yes	Yes, patrilocal
6. Nazerke	25	Graduate/No	1 year/No	Matrilocal	No	Yes	No
7. Inabat	28	Undergrad/No	4 years/Yes	Bilocal	No	No	No
8. Ainur	26	Undergrad/No	3 years/Yes	Bilocal	Yes	No	Yes, patrilocal
9. Lyazzat	25	Graduate/Yes	2 months/No	Bilocal	No	Yes	No
10. Inkar	29	Undergrad/Yes	4 months/No	Matrilocal	No	No	No
11. Nurai	26	Undergrad/Yes	4,5 years/Yes	Bilocal	Yes (neolocal in Almaty)	No (state of divorce)	Yes, patrilocal
12. Aidana	27	Undergrad/Yes	1 year/No	Patrilocal	No	Yes	Yes
13. Roza	41	Graduate/Yes	4 years/Yes	Patrilocal	No	Yes	No
14. Erkezhan	19	Undergad in progress/No	1 year/No	Patrilocal	No	No	Yes
15. Ayala	28	Undergrad/Yes	1 month/No	Bilocal	No	Yes	No
16. Symbat	28	Undergrad/No	3 years/Yes	Patrilocal	Yes (neolocal)	No	Yes, patrilocal
17. Yelikay	27	Graduate/Yes	5 months/No	Neolocal	No	No	No
18. Almira	26	Undergrad/No	2 months/No	Patrilocal	No	No	No
19. Gainel	32	Undergrad/Yes	9 years/Yes	Matrilocal	No	Yes	No
20. Akerke	23	Undergrad/Yes	2 years/No	Neolocal	Yes	No	Yes,both patrilocal and matrilocal
21. Aruzhan	26	Undergrad/Yes	2 years/No	Matrilocal	Yes, neolocal	Yes	No

The goal was to find ethnically Kazakh women aged between 18-30 years, married for less than 5 years, who live in Astana and Almaty, and are representative of the urban middle class.

The focus on Kazakh women stems from distinct expectations for Kazakh women, particularly within the framework of marriage and family relations – traditional norms such as patrilocal co-residence and the social role of *kelin* remain meaningful. While I intended to interview ethnically Kazakh women exclusively, fitting criteria other than ethnicity was not a subject for elimination if a woman identified herself as Kazakh. Likewise, Tatar women who were raised by Kazakh mothers or Kazakh women whose mothers were Russians identified themselves as Kazakhs and took part in the research. By focusing on Kazakh women, this study aims to uncover how cultural norms – such as patrilineal traditions, patrilocal residence, and kinship obligations – inform and shape women's roles, choices, and performances of agency. Importantly, the age criteria were not as strict as the '5 years newlywed' status, thus I interviewed 19 years old newlywed and 41 years old newlywed.

When it comes to the research participant with a pseudonym - Aruzhan, who nowadays lives in Zhezqazgan which is in Central Kazakhstan, she was welcomed to participate because after getting married they lived in Astana. As for Gainel who lives 100 kilometers away from Astana and has been married for 9 years and does not necessarily fit the criteria for a 'newlywed' which implies being married for around 5 years, she was included due to her willingness to contribute. Furthermore, it seems that being married for 9 years does not outweigh the value of sharing and trust. Given that it was not possible to conduct all the interviews at once, especially given me insisting on face-to-face offline meetings, some of the interviews were delayed. For instance, Nurai agreed to participate in research in 2022 and when we agreed to meet up in 2023, she was already at the midst of divorce proceedings. Interestingly, the change in her status and overall life patterns did not propel her to withhold the consent. For me, it meant that the interview would differ, and it required me to be sensitive to Nurai's feelings – I made sure that prior to our meeting, we outlined the boundaries of what is appropriate and what is not.

This kind of research is demanding from an ethical point of view. Thus, I was determined to ensure that participants familiarized themselves with research questions prior to the interviews, they would know that it is unproblematic not to answer certain questions or even terminate the interview – it was fundamental that participants felt supported and understood. They had an opportunity to contact me anytime, rearrange our interviews by changing date, time and place – this approach required me invest my time, attention and care to every research participant. It was not an easy process, yet amicable relations were key to maintaining trust and reciprocity.

There is no exhaustive definition of what 'middle class' in Kazakhstan is. Following that, I identify several selection criteria: material well-being and not struggling with financial insecurities, ownership of real estate or the capacity to rent an apartment, if necessary, the ability to leisure or travel without compromising financial security, a capacity to afford non-essential amenities. Within the scope of the following research, middle class, without calculating the income, is the part of society 'which occupies the mid-position between the highest and lowest classes. It is characterized by the high level of cohesiveness, incomes, consumption, the possession of material or intellectual property and a capability for the highly skilled labor' (Shakirova 2007 in Daly 2008, 16). To objective and subjective indices of the middle class, I refer the following: home or apartment ownership by either newlyweds or their respective parents, or capacity to rent a convenient apartment if necessary, renting out an apartment or having an intention, and a capacity, to improve housing conditions; if not material wealth then well-being and ownership of a car, being able to travel abroad or having had this experience, level of education, various leisure activities that are compatible with labor participation, women's decision to work out of her willingness and not necessity, the ability to maintain a desired quality of life without relatives' support; non-essential amenities that

include ordering food and groceries online or via *arbuz* app, having resources to order cleaning services or having a babysitter.

2.10. *Analytical Tools used for Data Interpretation*

The data was studied using a 'thematic discourse analysis' within a dialogical method that later turned into a 'mode of discourse'. Most of my work is written as a reflexive account of the journey I took when attempting to uncover how and why women do marriage in practice (Braun and Clarke 2006). By means of a reflexive approach, I intended to maintain honesty in reporting when, where and how the data was collected, and to reveal how rigorous and lively the journey of developing a research methodology is (Ryan and Golden 2006). While research questions aim to uncover the relationship between women's agency and residential patterns, most of my research in a practical sense embody 'the reflexive account of how knowledge is produced' (De Graeve 2019, 5). Rather than constantly rehearse the well-trodden academic reasoning and controversies, I intentionally shifted my attention towards noticing and documenting how women narrate about their married lives. I was looking for shared meanings, discursive patterns, and women's 'interpretative repertoires', tone of the voice and tempo. It turned out that informants' stories and narratives 'never communicate raw experiences' because they also entail 'a process of representation, interpretation and reconstruction' (Jackson 1998, 49-50). In some sense, my research is the investigation of the discursive role of marriage and family, partnership, and love, 'gendered obligations', and cultural certainties, emotional and financial costs in Kazakh married women's accounts of how and why 'they do marriage'.

A close reading of those narratives helps to explore women's strategies and activities that can be seen as proxies of their level of welfare (household management, professional development, personal recreation and selfcare). By means of employing a framework of dialogical anthropology, introduced by Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Manheim in their

collaborative work 'The Dialogic Emergence of Culture' (1995), I relied upon a more participatory and reflexive methodology that acknowledges the co-construction of knowledge between anthropologists and the people they study. There, dialogical anthropology 'puts the voices of the people the anthropologist finds in the field in the foreground, making the sources, the situations, the contexts visible and explicit. It marks the shift from a one-dimensional perspective to polyphony, where there is space for all the multiple, heterogenous subjectivities in the field' (Biscaldi 2020, 270). Since I intend to uncover the interplay between post-marital residence and women's agency, I touch upon quite sensitive topics such as the relationship between husband and wife, newlyweds' relationship with extended family and the peculiarities of every unique family system. To maintain reciprocity, firstly, I had to reflect on my personal experience of navigating through marital life. Secondly, I found it necessary to reconcile my experiences with what other women go through. Overall, the concepts of 'embodied understanding' and 'an ethics of intersubjective vulnerability' are fundamental to how lived experiences get to be internalized, reflected upon, and put on paper.

During a period of eight months, I constantly observed my 32 research participants via social media, we also periodically met in person or maintained 'our interaction' via emailing; I put emphasis on sharing where I am at with my research and my marriage as well, and 'such a dialogical approach may only be practical with a relatively small number of people' (Butler 2009, 28). The challenge to this approach is 'not wishing to impose own writing styles and conventions' on informants' mode of expression' (Butler 2009, 27). Throughout the data gathering process and during the interviews, I was looking for shared meanings that either uphold or disrupt cultural certainties and the ways in which multiple worldviews overlapped.

Doing autoethnography implies reflecting upon the experiences that make us uncertain and extensively interacting with participants to create a storyline, observe and investigate recurring

themes, discursive patterns and 'interpretative repertoires'. In attempts to understand how my personal experience differs or corresponds with other stories, I needed to perform an 'archeological dip' by consulting different artifacts (Adams et al 2015, 49). Besides engaging in conversational and dialogic exchange with other married women, and to enrich my interpretative frames, I examined relevant and contemporary blogs, podcasts, films, news outlets, as well as observed research participant's social media. Noticing recurring themes and rhetoric influenced what issues I later found important to the research. I hesitated to delve into pre-soviet or post-soviet periods, nor did I intrusively searched for archival memoirs or literary narratives of how Kazakh women performed in marriage. This is because I was interested in the current space that we live in, and in modern urban women who navigate through ongoing conversations on femininity, motherhood, wifehood, *uyat*, self-fulfillment and success.

To keep track of all the interactions, nuances and peculiarities of informants' life stories and backgrounds, to make sure that the details of the chronicle of every interaction was documented, I recorded the interviews and transcribed verbatim for each. I paid attention at tone of the voice and tempo, pauses and repetitions, excitement, and hesitations. I also wrote a personalized reflexive journal and conducted the 'member checks'. A practice of 'member checks' is a process of gathering feedback from respondents, which helped to gain insights into how my findings and inquiries do indeed resonate with what they have experienced. By this, I maintained openness and trust through a constant dialogue, while I was also searching for research participants' 'interpretative repertoires' or the discursive patterns - the 'stories' that women tend to tell when reflecting on their married lives (Potter and Wetherell 1987). To be more specific, Blood (2005, 60-61) suggested that 'interpretative repertoires' are useful as '…a way of understanding the concept of discourse and how that content is organized' into 'genres of explanation'.

By exploring the 'interpretative repertoires and discursive patterns of the informants, I was looking for their own context specific definitions and descriptions of 'the agency' and for the variability in the discursive themes, pertaining to married life and options that it gives. Meanwhile, during the interviews it became evident that the 'narrative' in itself is a 'tool of display' of their agency – narratives are crucial in both 'doing kinship' and 'doing marriage' (Finch 2007, 77-78). A story can be narrated in a variety of different ways – by using mundane facts or an eloquent language, refer to lively images and ideas or organize around trivialities, it can touch upon everyone but a woman herself, or revolve around her personal aspirations and worries. The narratives organized into lists of themes, systems of meanings and 'knowledge scripts', and were 'performed' through various speech techniques, specific to every individual woman. Within an autoethnographic approach, it is crucial to pay attention at how stories are constructed and told – 'autoethnographers must take seriously the epistemic (claims to knowledge) and the aesthetic (practices of imaginative, creative and artistic craft) characteristics of autoethnographic texts' (Gingrich-Philbrook 2005 in Adams et al 2014, 23).

2.11. *Dialogical Method: Discourse Analysis, 'Interpretative Repertoires' and Discursive Patterns*

The premises that I found instrumental for conducting the research derive from Johannsen's (1992, 74) applied post-modern ethnography that 'seeks to present objectively and fruitfully a number of different voices each of which has the authority to contribute a thorough portrayal of the target culture meaningful to a variety of readership'. Such ethnography does so by means of establishing a dialogue between a researcher and researched. A true dialogue resists power imbalances, inherent in anthropological studies, and turns down such attitudes as 'giving the people studies the means of representation and letting them go on with it' in favor of maintaining 'mutual acknowledgement of the value of each other's perspective' and of 'complementary perspectives' (Butler 2009, 25). Johannsen's (1992) opus is complementary to Graeber's (2007, 270) as the later suggests that commitment to favoring conversations and

the practice of dialogue 'patch together a sense of humanity', that is built upon a sense of likeness which is fundamental to making communication possible. When it comes to dialogue, then an interaction might digress into irrelevant matters, one might suggest. Nonetheless, casual digressions deepen engagement in one's narratives and assist in a collective reflective process through both 'individual self-expression and collective collaboration' (Grubacic and Vodovnik 2021, 7). When me and Madina, from Astana who now lives neolocally, turned our discourse to the things she enjoys, which is walking and hiking, I asked the following: 'Why don't you get a dog?'. Madina responded:

> *I want to get a dog, yet due to misunderstandings with my husband, I did not know if we will stay together. I have a cat, and even with a cat it would have been harder to move out all by myself. I decided that when I will be completely sure that we will not divorce and that we are indeed a family – I will get a dog. It is all because I do not have my own apartment. My parents are in Almaty, and we do not have great relationship either, so I would not want to move in with them. I do not want to live with my father, there a lot of things that I do not like in Kazakh men…Moreover, my parents do not like animals.* (Madina)

It seems that having a dog has nothing to do with either women's agency or residence patterns. Furthermore, this question seems to appear out of nowhere, as if it is irrelevant to the subject of the research. Nonetheless, this topic resonates with the theme that this research is intended to explore and allows Madina to sit back and think of personal desires to then move into her reflections on uncertainties pertaining to her marriage, absence of her own apartment that deprives her of choice, and discontent with Kazakh men who, arguably, follow some cultural scripts that uphold certain uneasy behaviors. Unintentionally, by digressing from the main questions of the interview, we collectively replaced one discourse by another. In analogical anthropology, this is referred as 'talking above', 'talking beyond' or 'talking later'

– ‘however far removed it may seem to be, is equivalent or proportionate…to the previous discourse’ as ‘the dialogue is a continuous process and itself illustrates process and change’ (Tedlock 1979, 389).

What is more important, this excerpt should be put within the context of our interview, and our personal relationship with Madina. When I offered Madina several options where to conduct our interview, she chose my apartment. Since we follow each other on Instagram, for more than 2 years, she knows that I have a dog – to which she expressed her sympathy by responding to the posts featuring my dog named Akbar. When Madina arrived, she was not surprised to be welcomed by the Siberian husky of an impressive size. As interview proceeded, she occasionally oversaw Akbar and took an interest in asking about his maintenance. While she enjoyed his presence and it alleviated the discomfort of our first personal encounter, the dog allowed us to go further and beyond in our discussions. At the bare minimum, how unusual it is to have a dog in an apartment especially for Kazakhs, and how did I personally introduce my dog to my future husband, and his parents – habitually, a Kazakh woman with a dog is propelled to give it away prior to getting married. I am unable to present a sufficient explanation for these occasions, nor do I know a specific tradition that upholds this practice, yet it is not infrequently brought up, and we did address it during our meeting with Madina. Below, I will also touch upon Gaukhar’s reflections about her individual character which she called ‘*qyrsyqtau*’, in Kazakh language it stands for ‘insistent’ - it was this individual peculiarity that accompanied her performances of agency. I would suggest that a quality such as ‘*qyrsyqtau’* was instrumental in defending my possession of the dog before my parents-in-law, and in other relevant occasions that necessitated being pushy on my behalf. These premises hold if one would approach them as if ‘personal confessions of what really happened in the field’ indeed hold (Tedlock 1979, 389).

While providing participants with enough space and time to create and deliver their narratives, a true dialogue transforms 'a ritual, an institution, a life history, or any unit of typical behavior to be described or interpreted into a speaking subject' (Clifford 1986, 15 in Butler 2009, 22). Firstly, the dialogical nature of the interviews resulted in meaningful conversations where participants' 'interpretative repertoires', discursive patterns and themes became apparent – it was only necessary to transcribe each interview verbatim. Secondly, engaging in close collaboration with participants and observing how women narrate about their marital quandaries, whether they shared openly and expressively or remained reserved, is also indicative of agency. For instance, there were participants who filled up their narratives with obscene language, some shed tears, while others narrated vividly by recalling specific examples and occasions. Within the scope of this research, narrative by itself is 'a tool of display' – a performative act of storytelling (Finch 2007, 77). A reflection or storytelling can be constructed in a variety of different ways – by using mundane facts or an eloquent language, refer to lively images and ideas or organize around trivialities, it can touch upon everyone but a woman herself, or revolve around her personal aspirations and worries.

As interviews proceeded, these narratives organized into lists of themes, systems of meanings and 'knowledge scripts', and were 'performed' through various speech techniques, specific to every individual woman. Thirdly, while I attempted to uncover how women's agency responds to changes in newlyweds' residence patterns, I stumbled upon the variety of women's own interpretations of context-specific agency and how they perceive it and reflect on it. I have noticed that it is usually women who decide on the timing of childbirth, suggest leisure activities, and 'take the initiative'. Gaukhar from Almaty, who has been married for 4 years and co-resided with husband's mother for 2 years to then move bilocally, shared how she takes un upper hand in daily strategizing as she is insistent – she called herself '*kyrsyktau*' in Kazakh, and the meaning revolves around being pushy or obstinate. While she put a lot of

emphasis on her individual character and peculiarities, she admittedly noted how it is important to be independent as a woman, as well as to be supported by husband and be in partnership with him. I asked Gaukhar who had made the decision regarding when to have a child. Gaukhar responded by emphasizing her initiative: '*I suggest that it is me, for the most part. Because it will affect my career progression, and well-being*'. In the narratives, Gaukhar has often made passing remarks on 'taking the initiative'. For instance, it is her who suggested new arrangement on how to spend leisure time – go on weekly dates as she needed to revitalize the relationship through experiencing 'new emotions'; It was also Gaukhar's 'initiative' (moya iniciativa) to discuss how the marriage proposal will be organized. She later elaborated on her frequently taking an upper hand in navigating strategic and every-day activities. From her narratives, agency can be coded as follows: be employed, be responsible for household management, 'take the initiative' when it comes to leisure, accommodate cooking according to her own needs to maintain a healthy diet, minimizing interactions with both sets of relatives, suggesting how the proposal will look like, valuing women as 'irreplaceable'. She also pinpointed that it is crucial to stay practical and straightforward, notify her partner that she is not willing to perform *kelin*-related responsibilities to forewarn his expectations, be occupied with activities such as yoga, group therapy, coffeetime with friends and being able to travel alone. While most of Gaukhar's definitions of agency are specific to her, other participants tend to follow along similar lines, only to add their own context-specific modes of performing agency. Likewise, Gaukhar elaborated that:

> *I am feminist in a sense that men need women as it is women who are responsible for the continuation of their line of descent, bear, and nurture children – a lot of things depend on us, women. To induce a woman into this venture (i.e. marriage) – a man can sometimes get down on his knees (during a proposal, for example). Women are irreplaceable.* (Gaukhar)

One of the questions was: ‘How do you think your residence pattern affects the ways in which you make decisions with your husband?’. While this question did not touch upon Gaukhar’s personality characteristics or values, she took time to reflect on the period when they co-resided patrilocally with his mother:

> *As a couple we are autonomous…When we lived with his mother, I usually caught myself thinking ‘why do I have to do this, why and for what?’. I wanted to show that I will not adapt to her [mother-in-law], it was my attitude. Probably, it was the reason why we had arguments, maybe I should have been more flexible. However, I was not flexible, I always stood my ground. Husband’s support was important too*. (Gaukhar)

From our dialogic interaction, it became evident that agency can be attributed to woman’s individual character peculiarities, as it is also associated with structural factors such as being employed, being independent or ‘autonomous’, being supported by a husband, being able to negotiate and bargain. Thematic discourse analysis allows for identifying emerging themes and categories, ‘interpretative repertoires’ and developing a ‘word cloud’ (Pontes et al 2024, 10). Likewise, the words ‘my initiative’ and ‘being autonomous’ are found to be repetitive and are instrumental in understanding Gaukhar’s performances of agency, and her strategizing pertaining to changing the living arrangement from patrilocal co-residence to bilocal residence. Given that the primary data comes from the interviews with participants and our dialogical encounters, I have had enough opportunities to investigate the discursive role of marriage and family, partnership and love, cultural certainties and ‘gendered obligations’, matrimonial strategizing, and conflict resolution.

Delving into women’s narratives allows to uncover the ways in which women reflect on how they perform in marriage, manage their decision-making horizons, and reconcile their ‘doing’ family with self-projects. It is dialogical anthropology that allows a researcher to engage in dialogue with participants, it ‘puts the voices of the people the anthropologist finds

in the field in the foreground, making the sources, the situations, the contexts visible and explicit. It marks the shift from a one-dimensional perspective to polyphony, where there is space for all the multiple, heterogenous subjectivities in the field' (Biscaldi 2020, 270). Likewise, engaging in dialogue facilitates vulnerability and reciprocity, it helps to draw inferences based on women's structural factors, background, and her individual character as well.

2.12. *Definitions*

Having overviewed the scope of my research, I now turn to the definitions of the main 12 concepts: agency, marriage, family, kinship, family of orientation, family of procreation, pre-marital agency, in-marriage agency, residence patterns and intergenerational proximity, patrilineality. Then, I go over the fourfold typology of marital residence patterns: patrilocality, matrilocality, bilocality and neolocality. While I rely upon scholarly definitions, I also introduce participants' ideas as 'each personal history reveals different dimensions of the ambivalence within categories of kinship and marriage…' (Borneman 2006, 38).

•Agency – is the individual's capacity to 'step out of routine behaviors and try to change environment or outcomes' through 'direct decision-making processes or indirect means' (Donald et al 2017, 3). Further to this, agency is usually regarded as differential and 'bound', entailing purposeful, strategic action, resilience and patience, as it is oftentimes relational with others (Duncan and Carter 2018). During interviews, I also noticed a third type of agency – a performative agency or the ways in which women used their 'interpretative repertoires' during our dialogic interactions, or the discursive patterns and speech acts they employed to reflect on their marital experiences (Potter and Wetherell 1995; Wetherell 20021; Blood 2005; Reynolds 2008). To add, agency is not only associated with decision-making or narrative performances, it can also be captured by number of proxy indicators such as the level of education,

demographic variables, ownership of and control over assets, employment status, control over income or the exposure to media (Vaz, Pratley and Alkire 2016).

• Marriage – an institution that assumes a long-term voluntary contract that 'facilitates emotional investment in the relationship, as it also 'allows the partners to make choices that carry immediate costs…' (Waite 1995, 498). What is more important, 'marriage is stretched to fit and made to serve the practical goals and situations of actual and diverse peoples…' (Borneman 2006, 40). It means that 'persons marrying (or their parents) can be assumed to expect to raise their utility level above what it would be were they to remain single' and 'each person tries to find the best mate' (Becker 1973, 814). Most participants' definitions boil down to the pursuit of personal happiness and satisfaction, as they usually emphasize safety, unconditional support, companionship, and trust – all peculiar to a form of companionate marriage based on romantic love. Others approach marriage as means to raise utility gains and commodities produced within a household.

• Bricolage – can be translated as 'do-it-yourself' or DIY, it is an act of conscious and creative pragmatism and invention of plans from available materials, 'to make do with what is to hand using well-known rules of thumb, and so create something from 'nothing'. It addresses the variety of ways in which individuals mix and reconcile 'tradition' and 'modern', 'the social' and 'individual'. Bricolage can be social and impregnated with collective moralities, as it can also rely on traditions, emotions, and rationality (Carter and Duncan 2018, 179-181).

• Family – a group of people, usually consisting of parents and children; based on the structural diversity model and counter to the false universalization, there is a full range of families that exist today. Family members 'actively shape their families by adapting to, and changing, certain aspects of their social environments…' through 'human agency' – there, 'ingenuity and agency may result in new family arrangements' (Zinn et al 2011, 25).

• Kinship – it is 'both the biological system of relations, quite apart from any sociocultural aspects…', yet 'is also a system of sociocultural aspects' (Schneider 1984, 97). To reconcile biological aspects with sociocultural, Morgan (1870, 10) proposed that kinship is 'a formal arrangement of the more immediate blood kindred into lines of descent, with the adoption of some method to distinguish one relative from another, and to express the value of the relationship…'. Marriage between the two is the origin of the affinal kin.

• Pre-marital agency – is the 'socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' in a 'dialogic, co-constructed view of language as a form of social action' (Ahearn 2001, 111-113). It situates 'agency' during pre-marital agreements and negotiations – the agency performed in a linguistic form (Ahearn 2001). It is performed by an ability to exercise a right to choose a spouse and enter marriage with 'free and full consent' and is associated with structural factors such as access to financial resources and assets, gender role attitudes, educational level, support needs and labor market participation). It is also inseparable from human mental functioning that is biased to individual experiences, priorities, and choices.

• In-marriage agency - is the form of action deployed primarily during marital negotiations pertaining to residential patterns, household management, allocation of the time and resources (material and social), access to resources, on the one hand, and the modalities of women's agency that are associated with her personal aspirations pertaining to her education, career, or family planning, on the other hand (Thapan 2003). It is particularly 'bound' to interpersonal dynamic with not only a partner, but also an extended network of relatives.

• Residence patterns - is intergenerational proximity (solidarity/intimacy) between newlyweds and their respective kin, it determines the level of involvement with extended kin and caregiving responsibilities, and different types of bonds and relational commitment (Judd 1989 and Zhang 2009 in Gruijters 2019, 4-5).

• Patrilineality or a patrilineal descent – is deeply associated with genealogies and the notion of lineage. It is common for Kazakhs to know their seven grand-fathers in order not to marry someone 'who shares a common patrilineal ancestor within seven generations' (Ismailbekova 2014, 378). What is more important, while patrilineal descent is about progeny and their genealogies, patrilineal descent encourages male kin dominance in domains that are weakly related to children/grandchildren and their respective upbringing and socialization. Patrilineality extends into domains such as newlyweds' residential patterns and the actual place of accommodation, household management and budgeting, time management and day planning, travelling etc – specific to every particular coupledom.

The fourfold typology of residence patterns:

While I schematically divide residential patterns into a fourfold typology, I find it important to note how residential relationships are also categorized as co-residence and nearby residence (Reiko 2021, 62). The following typology is found to be in a reciprocal correlation with marriage, family, kinship and descent, yet residence itself 'has commonly been viewed as one of the key driving forces of broader social culture' (Murdock 1949 in Moravec et al 2022, 10).

• Patrilocality –is a residential pattern, where newlyweds live with the groom's parents or relatives, or reside somewhere nearby in the same city. It is sometimes approached as 'the custom of patrilocality' as it tends to 'foster lifelong bonds between parents and sons, reinforcing the dominance of male over female kinship ties' (Whyte 2003 in Gruijters and Ermisch 2017). It is also associated with either parents' reliance on the support of their sons (and daughters'-in -aw), or the newlyweds' dependence on his parents' maintenance. Most of the interviewed women have an experience of either patrilocal co-residence or nearby residence – this is not necessarily a rule, yet 'it is implied that frequent occurrence is good evidence for the existence of a rule' (Barnes 1960, 854).

• Matrilocality – is a residential pattern, where newlyweds live nearby the bride's parents, and rarely co-reside with them. This residential set up is usually associated with circumstances, where the husband's parents and relatives live in a city different than that where newlyweds met, studied or lived and decided to stay. According to scholarship, matrilocality (co-residing with a bride's kin) is rare and unusual, especially in patrilineal societies (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018).It is oftentimes associated with stigma for men, yet is positively associated with women's status within her marriage and a higher level of autonomy (Niraula and Morgan 1996).

• Bilocality – is a residential pattern, where newlyweds live close to both sets of parents – co-residence is not usually possible. This residential pattern is most prevalent in couples who were born in the same region or a city, or when he or she moved parents to live closer (Barnes 1960).

• Neolocality – is a residential pattern, where newlyweds live far from both sets of parents or close to neither his or her parents or relatives. This pattern is expected among 'high status' couples – those who are demanded on the labor market or have a capacity to travel abroad (Gruijters and Ermisch 2017, 2).

2.13. *Chapter Summary*

This chapter delves into the research methodologies employed to study the relationship between post-marital residence patterns and women's agency in marriage among urban middle-class married Kazakh women in Astana and Almaty. It also provides an overview of the modes of analysis used in the research. It emphasizes a reflexive account of knowledge production, considering the author's personal experiences of navigating marital life while working on the thesis. This personal reflection is integrated into the research strategy, employing concepts like 'embodied understanding' and 'an ethics of intersubjectivity' to internalize and reflect upon lived experiences. A dialogic autoethnographic approach is used to build trust and reciprocity with participants, addressing sensitive topics such as relationships with extended family and

unique family systems. My transparency about personal marital experiences helps to maintain honesty and emotional integrity in the field, transforming interviews into dialogic encounters.

The primary objective is to understand how different residence patterns influence women's agency in marriage. The chapter begins by outlining the rationale for focusing on women's agency in marriage, questioning whether the institution of marriage accommodates various needs and worldviews, or if it imposes certain behaviors. The study shifts its focus from the institutions of marriage to the agents within it – exploring how they perform their roles within marriage. This study posits that while strong patrilineal norms prevail in Kazakhstan, newlyweds negotiate and reinvent traditions, introducing creative arrangements in their residence patterns, or to change their living arrangements. The research aims to uncover how these residence patterns affect women's performance of agency.

This research highlights that newlyweds rarely adhere strictly to one residence pattern – many change their living arrangements due to various factors, including parents' relocation, or inability to create newlyweds' own family practices independently from relatives', or employment options and business trips. This dynamic nature of residence patterns offers insights into how women's performances of agency evolve in response to changing living arrangements. While marriage can provide security, a sense of fulfillment, and stability, it can also limit women's opportunities and options. Women's agency is investigated through their ability to define personal goals and act upon them, free of violence, retribution, of rear. This study aims to provide a closer look at the dynamics of women's empowerment and the social organization of modern urban Kazakh family practices.

Chapter two concludes by emphasizing the importance of reflexivity and personal narrative in understanding family practices and women's agency in marriage. The author's identity as a married woman and a researcher plays a crucial role in shaping the research process and interpreting findings. The chapter underscores the complexities and challenges of studying

intimate aspects of marital life and the importance of adapting research strategies to the realities of participants' experiences. A comprehensive approach not only uncovers the interplay between post-marital residence and women's agency but also contributes to broader discussions on gender and empowerment in Kazakhstan.

3. Chapter III. Kinship Beyond Myth: Past and Present.

3.1. *Introduction*

This chapter explores how Kazakh women have been historically perceived by external narrators, particularly through the frameworks of colonial Soviet ideologies. These frameworks often depict Kazakh women as submissive, passive figures within patriarchal traditions – a portrayal that served Soviet agenda of 'modernizing' Central Asia by means of strategic redeployment of notions of family practices, norms, and gender relations. Against this perspective, I delve into the story of my paternal great-grandmother Alipa to contrast external portrayals with an illustration of lived experiences of Kazakh women. Further to this, the chapter also delves into post-colonial perspective emphasizing how women perform their individual agency leveraging control and power from moral frameworks and practices that derive from patrilineal and patriarchal traditions. Individual stories often highlight marriage and family as relational practices, flexible in form and function. This perspective sheds light on the variability of experiences within family structures and kinship relations, where women acquire 'the culturally legitimate authority of women' within a 'constraining patriarchal structure' (Ismailbekova 2015, 2, 4). By delving into both the colonial and post-colonial narratives, this chapter reveals how marriage and family are relational practices that should not be narrowed down to a specific content.

3.2. *Colonial and Soviet Perspectives: An External Gaze*

Kazakh women have historically been subjects of external scrutiny and internal resilience, with their lives often narrated through the lenses of colonial discourse and the rigid framework imposed by traditions and its iterations. These external views, deeply entrenched in Orientalist biases, have portrayed Kazakh women as passive recipients of oppressive practices, overshadowing the complex dynamics of agency, adaptation, and tradition within Kazakh families. The colonial narrative, which positioned Kazakh women within a framework of

patriarchal subjugation, was instrumental in justifying Soviet interventions in Central Asia. Against this backdrop of external narratives, the internal experiences of Kazakh women, like my paternal great-grandmother Alipa, reveal a more nuanced story – one that highlight the dynamic nature of 'doing' family. As Akiner (1997, 263) suggests, Central Asian women are at the crossroads and are 'caught between conflicting impulses: some feel the need to return to their 'authentic' roots, with a renewed emphasis on traditional domestic obligations; others, to continue along the road to greater personal independence and freedom'.

The Soviet legacy is an integral part of the ideological terrain upon which the issues of gender norms and marriage expectations are being debated in Central Asia. From the historical perspective, the category of 'woman' and cultural truths about marital customs have long been discursively shaped by the Soviet state reports feeding upon colonial ethnography (Levshin 1832). The colonial discourse on Kazakh women, later amplified by Soviet ethnographers, positioned them within a framework of patriarchal oppression, often portraying them as passive victims of male-dominated traditions. This perspective served the Soviet agenda, which sought to 'modernize' Central Asia by disrupting traditional family structures and redefining gender roles (Kandiyoti 2007). Soviet 'modernization' and the preoccupation with the 'woman's question', subsequent post-Soviet struggle over 're-traditionalization' – the conflicting processes that shaped and reshaped hierarchical gender relations, attitudes towards childbearing and family planning (Nedoluzhko 2015). The socio-cultural and political chaos left the questions of female agency in everyday life, marriage arrangements and overall cultural authenticity – unanswered and confusing (Agadjanian 2003). The 'savior trope' has successfully camouflaged the plain social interventions, agenda on 'progress', purposeful mobilization of women under the slogan of 'liberation' of women, while in a matter of fact, 'the party set the task of preparing the masses of working women for an active and conscious participation in socialist construction' (translated by the author; Nuhrat 1929, 8).

As an outsider to the steppe, one could easily suggest that while women, sometimes, outperformed men in horseback riding, they did not have an upper hand in managing familial matters. First, because a woman was introduced into groom's family as *kelin*. Secondly, she was deemed to be a bearer and a nurturer of children, rather than a head of the household – especially considering son preference underpinned by a norm of patrilineal descent. Likewise, the practice of *kalym* was viewed as 'purchase and sale' (translated by the author; Shkapsky 1896). In practice, it serves as the way to intermarry groom and bride's kin or to 'to connect the spouse's relatives', the practice that 'confirming the connection between family-related groups', where occasionally 'a part of the paid bride price was transferred to the bride's dowry' (translated by the author; Stasevich 2011, 51). Today, some families may choose *kalym* as a tool to intermarry, or ensure bride's well-being in marriage –by equipping newlyweds with valuable assets such as apartment ownership. Within a single 'national collectivity', women and their families, manage to use a given set of customs and traditions to serve their personal needs – thus, the generalizations seem incomprehensible and superficial. Abramzon et al (1958, 220), for instance, point out how in early and the late 1950s, the practices of polygony and *kalym* were deemed to be the occasions of the least 'social backwardness', most likely in comparison to the marriage between minors arranged by their parents without the consent of the former. While bride abductions are widely criticized now, *Kalym* as a practice has been most enduring, probably because it serves as the tool to intermarry groom and bride's kin or to 'to establish kinship between the parents of the future spouses' (translated by the author), the practice that 'affirming the connection between two familial groups', where occasionally 'part of the paid bride price was transferred to the bride's dowry' (Stasevich2011, 51). *Kalym*, therefore, is far more complex than that of Shkapsky's (1896) speculations over 'purchase and sale'. The data or the 'knowledge', filled with biases, on gender, 'women's question' and marriage was produced – the 'knowledge' that did not correspond with the actual reality, or

seemed to eventually contradict itself, yet by 1924, the traditional practices such as kun, kalym, polygamy, levirate were deemed to be incompatible with the Soviet legislation.

The traditional culture was gradually reimagined and 'rendered invisible, confined to the most intimate and private spheres' (Akiner 1997, 261). For Kazakhs, the act of giving a girl into marriage extends far beyond the union of two individuals. It represents the merging and intertwining of broader kinship networks, often seen as strategic alliance that strengthened communal ties. Following wedding festivities, newly formed kinship networks reaffirm their connections and maintain the cohesion of the extended family network during national holidays, visits, birth of children, and communal feasts by exchanging gifts that reinforce the bonds between them. Marriage is described as a complex social contract that involves an intricate system of obligations and reciprocal exchanges among kin (Werner 2009, 54; Bissenova 2017, 33). Further to this, while colonial ethnographers emphasized the tensional aspects of marriage and family, Kazakh kinship relations maintain cooperative and communal approaches to managing interplay between family members, while the tensions and power imbalances can be mitigated through strategic shifts in residence or altering relational obligations and caregiving responsibilities. This dynamic is only seen in closer investigation of individual domestic households.

3.3. *Internal Realities. Postcolonial Perspectives: The Life of my Great-Grandmother Alipa*

Against the backdrop of external colonial narratives, the internal experiences of Kazakh women, like my paternal great-grandmother Alipa offer an intimate glimpse into the lived realities of Kazakh women. Putting personal experiences within the cultural contexts yields in 'ground level, in the thick of things' ways of understanding (Adams et al 2014, 33). From an external perspective, Alipa's life might seem to conform to the stereotypical narrative of a woman subordinated by tradition and men. The colonial and Soviet portrayals of Kazakh women as oppressed and in need of rescue has had lasting effects, influencing both historical

scholarship and contemporary perceptions. These external narratives often ignored the ways in which Kazakh women like Alipa engaged with and sometimes subverted the expectations placed upon them. Marriage, as other relational practices between individuals such as care giving or childrearing and community solidarity, undergoes constant change as it is transformed by both men and women – Soviet style norms as well were reimagined locally, despite state ideology (Bergton 1991; Abashin 2015). Marriage, in light of its volatile nature, might seem illusive because it encapsulates various forms of relatedness, systems of managing familial relations and is legitimated by different regimes be it the state, religion or a tangled web of specific social networks (Cleuziou and McBrien 2021, 134). Nonetheless, while marriage in Central Asia is agreed to be 'a pivotal element in the reproduction of a patriarchal ideology…' it is '…also often a female affair, in which women promote and negotiate coercive gender norms' (Cleuziou and McBrien 2021, 139). Postcolonial scholarship posits that the terms Central Asian women and kelin cannot be used interchangeably with slave, powerless, obedient, in need of a savior or a free labor (Bissenova 2023, 16). In fact, the term *kelin* translates from Kazakh language as daughter-in-law, in other words, any married woman in relation to her husbands' relatives. The term by itself does not suggest that all *kelins* are subordinate to patriarchal norms, that arguably feed on Kazakh women's' voluntary servitude. If this was the objective reality, then women are indeed devoid of any agency, which is not the case.

Aksana Ismailbekova, a Kyrgyz-born German scholar focusing on kinship and gender in Soviet Central Asia, elaborated extensively on the ways in which women construct their authority within and through custom. There, women's individual decision-making in marriage, and a capacity to creatively avoid conflicts or induce cooperation, is attributed to her subsequent advancement in 'career' from being *kelin* to becoming a mother-in-law herself. The authority is legitimated by local customs and traditions, and it covers various relational

interactions between a woman and her husband, parents-in-law, children, sons' wife's, extended family, and even neighbors. According to Ismailbekova's (2015, 4) article '*Constructing the Authority of Women through Custom: Bulak Village, Kyrgyzstan*', women's position progressively advances by producing progeny, and skillfully 'manipulating' kinship relations, or becoming a mother-in-law herself. Some scholarship on marriage in Central Asia also suggests that the institution of marriage is an agency-enhancing practice for women and is associated with the achievement of socioeconomic integration (Cleuziou 2017; 2019). This career advancement, as I suggest, was also available to women like my paternal great-grandmother Alipa in 1944. Acknowledging and noticing how women achieve traditionally legitimized authority in marriage stands counter to Kudaibergenova's (2018, 380; 381) perception of Kazakh married women as 'the most marginalized members of their family' and an 'obedient and selfless slave'. These understandings of *kelin* and her 'burdens' are generally built upon a composite image of women with references to the most striking manifestations of intolerance towards young women with lower status. Furthermore, this approach universalizes individual experiences as if every family system is identical. For instance, Kudaibergenova (2018, 381) reflects on practices and expectations such as '…kelin has to be a very skilled caregiver who is able to wake up exactly at six o'clock in the morning to prepare breakfast for her family' or 'she has to pour tea for numerous relatives and never mix up teacups (*piala*)'. The rhetoric that commodifies *kelins* into powerless and agentless members of the family overlooks the complexity of what '*kelin*-hood' can be and how it transforms through time and space in response to how individual women perform family related practices and introduce promethean arrangements.

However, it is still worth pointing out that integration into the husband's family is a challenging path and not every individual woman is able to successfully 'negotiate the patriarchal bargain'. The patriarchal fashioning of family life or 'the system' does not

guarantee women the authority to which they might be eligible for as they get older – some of them fail in this path due to, for instance, 'having a very difficult personality' (Ismailbekova 2015, 10, 12). However, this system does not necessarily imply that women would end up in a subordinate position without options and choice. This life course seems counterintuitive and opposite to straightforward because the perplexities of family systems are hidden within complex interactions between family members and within households, as they also depend upon personalities involved. While it is assumed that 'traditional' kinship structures are rigid, while romantic love is said to allow for greater flexibility and agency, recent anthropological studies have shown that performance in marriage and relational interactions in family context are always bound to social expectations and 'complex webs of meaningful relations' (Osella 2012; Pande 2015 in Cleuziou and McBrien 2021, 129). Furthermore, Ismailbekova (2015, 10) highlighted that 'being aware of the rules of the game', that might be peculiar to individual households, and being able to creatively perform in navigating, and sometimes manipulating, kinship relations is what grants women authority in private domains, that can indeed translate outside the confines of the household management. There, marriage can also be viewed as a differentiating and elevating practice, where a woman's status changes from being '*boidaq'* (single in Kazakh) to becoming a wife. The change in status by itself is associated with elevated respectability. Commercio (2018, 171), in the article on polygony in Kyrgyzstan, referred to a proverb, widely known in Central Asia, - 'a Woman without a Man is a Kazan [cauldron] without a Lid'. This sentiment, among many other meanings including viewing unmarried women as being vulnerable, also implies the benefits of being married as it aids in achieving 'gender respectability' (Fayzullaeva 2009 in Commercio 2018, 172). Therefore, the career advancement described by Ismailbekova (2015) is only available for those women who are married, as it is, or at least was, the only legitimate path to motherhood in Central Asia (Commercio 2018, 173).

This section is built to depict how versatile the concept of agency is and how power can indeed be built within a patriarchal patrilineal society, even if a bride's background and structural factors do not empower but disempower. Despite a dominant patrilineal structure, Kazakh women had a variety of agentive powers. Women and their families negotiated around dowry, young women received marriage counseling from older women, they also played an integral role in marriage rituals and ceremonies. Besides, women expanded their forms of agency by means of bearing children or being responsible for the household. In a sense, Alipa's story serves to withstand a 'certain trend of seeing the women of Central Asia as hopelessly downtrodden and oppressed' and the 'resisting patriarchy' take (Megoran 1999, 102). The attention to women's own 'coping mechanisms' and creative strategies or responses to 'a set of concrete constraints' aimed at optimizing life options, otherwise recognized as a theoretical construct of patriarchy, is identified as 'patriarchal bargains' (Kandiyotti 1988, 276). What is more important, the term patriarchal bargain is not uniform across time and space and 'may exhibit variations according to class, caste, and ethnicity' (Kandiyotti, 275). Overall, this term emphasizes women's accommodations and adaptations to specific constraints, rather than their overt resistance. In this light, marriage is not just a single term with a particular content, containing normative rules and instructions, but the playground, where individuals engage in practices and develop new arrangements – constant daily negotiations and personal stories reveal what marriage is and is not for individual women, and their families.

Alipa was my paternal great-grandmother. When she turned 13 in 1944, she respectively grew out of being '*qyz bala'* (girl child) into being '*kyz*' (girl), or in other words – '*boyzhetken*' which, in Kazakh, means 'marriageable'. Shortly after turning 13, she was given in marriage to an older man, whose wealth and status surpassed that of her family – this, according to Kandiyoti (1988) would have been the example of how 'classic patriarchy' subordinates young married women to a household managed by their husbands' father. Nonetheless, marriage is

not simply about women, but also about relations, where matrimony is just only one type of possible relations with a variety of 'practical marriage arrangements' (Cleuziou and McBrien 2021, 124, 126). On the one hand, by ensuring that their daughters married into wealth, Kazakh families aimed to strengthen their own social networks and improve their family's overall standing within the community. Furthermore, marrying into wealth was seen as a way to ensure that a daughter would be well provided for, thereby securing not only her material comfort but also her status and respect within society (Werner 2009, 57). Likewise, marriage also serves as the coping mechanism for families, where individual arrangements are meant to bring relief to challenging financial situations. Across distinct matrimonial settings, the indicators of women's' agency may vary as these are context dependent (Vaz et al, 2015). Indeed, by marrying into a family with greater economic resources, Alipa enjoyed better living conditions, spacious and comfortable home, access to higher quality food, clothing, and jewelry – being part of the family with a long lineage of respected judges, known for its generational prestige and influence, afforded her a level of respect. This improved standing also provided Alipa with more agency in her daily life, allowing her to exercise greater control over social interactions in general, and within her natal family's structures by advising and patronizing her younger brothers and sisters. On the other hand, Alipa was her husband's only wife, which meant that her authority within the household was neither shared or downplayed by the presence of other women or their children. This part of Alipa's story already stands as a counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse that often portrays Central Asian women as uniformly oppressed and devoid of agency. Outside of other forms relatedness or intimacy, for women who were occupied with fashioning their family and kinship dynamics, marriage in itself may turn into a practice or 'a mode of exerting power' (Cleuziou and McBrien 2021, 128). The outcomes of a woman's integration into new family system depended on woman's own ambitions to legitimize her positions and engage in the process and sets of everyday practices.

While in our family Alipa's life was usually narrated in a gender-neutral language, as if her life choices were culturally and socially conditioned sets of dispositions, this story overlooks the ways in which Alipa examined and adapted to certain elements of tradition, creatively performed within given cultural certainties on the daily basis, and how her agentive powers have changed with time. It might seem that Alipa had a limited marital decision-making power, particularly as 13 years old, yet it does not explicitly suggest that later in marriage she had no influence on how disputes were solved, or family relations were navigated. Through time, she gained authority to which an elderly woman, who gave birth to sons and daughters, are expected to become eligible for. Byer (2010) calls it the 'authority of elders' that, irrespectively of gender is earned naturally due to investments into social relations. Along similar lines, Ismailbekova (2015, 4) points out that Central Asian women 'achieve culturally accepted authority and negotiate their power over the course of their lives by becoming morally accepted wives, credible daughters-in-law, and respected grandmothers'. Throughout her life, Alipa's agentive power was volatile and responsive to how her status has changed. Therefore, as the time passed by, she acquired leverages, besides her youth and beauty, to adapt or to comply and bargain.

It is generally agreed that the life of a rural woman is loaded with hard work such as taking care of the animals and poultry, working the land, cooking, cleaning, nurturing, and educating children. This might inflict the ideas of women being subordinate and exhausted. However, being responsible for the household that includes multiple children and numerous livestock is associated with the position of authority, power, and responsibility. In a sense, Alipa was the head of the household because without her, most of the tasks related to a life in a village would not have been accomplished. Overall, Kazakh women, particularly in rural areas, play a crucial role in managing household activities and 'in the dynamics of feasting and ritual exchange in post-Soviet Kazakhstan' (Werner 1998, 54). Secondly, Alipa debuted early as a mother which

means that her status went up with every consecutive child. In other words, within a patriarchal society with a patrilineal orientation, giving birth to children, especially sons, assumes a correspondent rise in status. In contrast to modern Kazakh women, who delay their motherhood, Alipa bettered her status using the exact leverages of the patriarchy early on.

Upon marrying into this family, Alipa was not only welcomed into a household of significant wealth and prestige, but also into an extensive support network that provided her with care, cooperation, and guidance, that were needed considering Alipa bearing children. Werner (1998) wrote extensively on how rural Kazakhs employ household networks to maintain and develop kinship relations, provide support, or receive it. This too requires 'decision, choice and skill' (Werner 1998, 60). In Kazakh and broader Central Asian traditions, when a woman marries, she is integrated into her husband's family, where the relations she builds are crucial to her adjustment and well-being. It is generally overlooked how living within a community of relatives can indeed be helpful, especially if groom's relatives perform as 'cooperators,' rather than a 'competitors'. A close proximity to relatives who are 'cooperators' is 'a precondition for the provision of care and other forms of time-intensive support between generations' (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 2). Alipa's story reflects a common practice in Central Asian societies where the extended family plays a pivotal role in the new bride's life, offering support as she navigates in a new environment. This support often includes assistance with domestic responsibilities, emotional guidance from elder women, all of which are designed to help the bride integrate into the household and fulfill her new role effectively (Kandiyoti 1998, 141-142).

Furthermore, there is a broad set of postpartum care practices, including taking care of a bride who has given birth, particularly during the first 40 days. This period is referred to as a time of 'confinement' or *qarashar* in Kazakh, where a new mother is given special attention, emotional and practical support from elder women to ensure her recovery and the health of the

newborn, as she is also relieved of most household duties (Kandiyoti 1998). The first 40-day period is marked by several customs that include providing a woman with nourishing food such as *sorpa* (a rich broth made from meat and bones), which is believed to restore a woman's strength. The practice of serving *sorpa* is the part of a larger cultural emphasis on the importance of nutrition and rest during this critical period, and a cultural understanding and communal responsibility over women's health and well-being (Laumulin 2009). The cooperative dynamic within Alipa's husband's family provided her with a sense of belonging and security, ensured that Alipa transitioned smoothly into her new role, reinforcing her position within the family and the broader social network. These narratives challenge the often-simplistic portrayal of Central Asian women as oppressed or isolated, instead showcasing the communal and cooperative aspects of family life that empower women.

I argue that marriage should be 'unmoored from earlier sureties' and erstwhile narratives that revolve around gender asymmetries, the duality of male oppressor and female oppressed, as there could have always been a room for expanding the scale of women's agentive powers and eventually marital decision-making. When it comes to women's decision-making power or agency in Central Asia, then as Ismailbekova (2015) pointed out, it is the 'national patriarchal ideology of family' that eventually gives women the leverages to become 'the bosses' of the family through childbearing, or growing from a *kelin* into a mother-in-law, for instance. I do not attempt to contrast and compare the experiences of a modern urban married Kazakh woman to how Alipa lived, as I am well aware of how individuals 'automatically be advantaged or disadvantaged depending on their background'; and that habitus, or a 'persons' incorporated story', 'generates and limits peoples' practices at the same time, but it is only in relation to certain structures that habitus produces given practices' (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992, 135 in Thieme 2008, 328). It is the act of 'doing' that creates marriage, family, and kinship relations (Morgan 2011).

Having explored the dual perspectives of external narratives and internal realities in the context of Kazakh women and traditions, the next section will examine how these themes continue to resonate in today's world. The lens of contemporary media discourse indicate how modern Kazakh women navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity, reflecting both continuity and change, the persistence of traditional values and the emergence of new narratives that challenge and redefine their roles in society.

3.4. *Delving into Media Discourse*

As I transition from the historical overview to the contemporary landscape, it is crucial to recognize how the portrayal of Kazakh women have evolved, particularly through media platforms. Today, Kazakh women are not only subjects of scholarly or traditional narratives but also active participants in creating and reshaping the discourse around their lives, identities, and roles in society. During interviews, I rarely noticed how women reflect on how things used to be, for instance 30 or 50 years ago, as they do not find it relevant to how they perform on daily basis or manage their marital decision-making horizons. While modern women rarely mention the past, most of them have Instagram accounts, watch videos on Youtube or TikTok, comment and engage in online conversations pertaining to topics they find appealing and relevant. While I was delving into academic scholarship, it is not disgraceful to admit that I spend considerable time wondering around the Web, watching *shorts* on Youtube or 3 hours long podcasts and interviews.

Hundreds of different narratives of women from different backgrounds allowed me to have a glimpse into traditional relational practices, recurring beliefs, and certainties within a social world of married women. While interviews provide with idiosyncratic narratives, a 'virtual world' has 'its own conventions and norms of narratives' (Markham 2004). The online investigation illuminated how contemporary adults engage in discursively critical discussions around womanhood, parenthood, consequences of certain traditions and self-fulfillment.

Likewise, to immerse myself into marital quandaries and existing rhetoric, for more than 2 years I have been watching and making notes on the Youtube podcast *Momskiy Angime [Mom's Conversations]*, that welcomes Kazakhstani public figures ranging from actress to doctors, hosted by the actress Ainur Ilyassova. It is fair to acknowledge how extraordinary it is in Kazakhstan to openly broadcast marital conflicts with either husband or mother-in-law, miscarriage, post-partum suicidal thoughts, separation of husbands with their mothers, bargaining with traditional certainties and willingness to perform outside of inflicted scripts. One of the episodes showcases, for instance, Laura Myrzakhmet an actress, who shares how she thought her mother-in-law some of the 'Kazakh' traditions such as '*bata beru'* which is a blessing given by older ones to *kelin*, or to anyone suitable – an unusual occurrence as it reverses the power dynamics, where older ones tend to teach younger generation as to what and how to do. She also narrates about inability to bear a child and her suggestions for the second wife, that were dismissed by her, arguably, loving husband. On the other hand, the actress Madina Ospan reflects on her journey as a newlywed, where her professional identity was challenged in the wake of becoming a wife, *kelin* and mother.

Delving into the Web gave me a sense of a shared experience of a group. I also watched TV series such as '*Kelinzhan*' (2019) that tells a story of a villager marrying urban woman, these series casually reveal how is it to be a *kelin* in a Kazakh village, among an extensive network of relatives and neighbors nearby. While I did not find '*Kelinzhan*' (2019) problematic, an interviewee Aidana from Astana recalled it during our meeting and suggested that the series promote patriarchal values and are indeed hideous. I did not change my attitude towards 'Kelinzhan'-alike films and series, I still find them humorously satirical, yet Aidana's mention of it confirmed that we both live in a similar media vacuum and are subjected to a prevailing rhetoric.

For the last couple of years, given a rapid evolution and liberation of Kazakhstani digital media, I have also had a chance to familiarize myself with several eye-opening Youtube channels. Likewise, *Dope Soz* channel publishes various content that is related to debating over post-colonial controversies, 'traditional families', *alyp kashu* or practice of bride abduction, women's questions, or why is divorce getting more frequent in Kazakhstan. In one of the latest episodes with Nagimusha, a blogger with 700.000 subscribers on Instagram and a significant presence in young peoples' media space, hosts note how it is only today in our history that we can speak up about sensitive topics, which was not possible just 2-3 years ago. The rise of social media and freedom with which users get to share their experiences, it seems, shape public opinion, respond to social tensions and spotlight the diversity of intellectual and moral meanings (Sutikina et al 2024). I suggest that freedom of speech that is now prevalent in online social media translates into liberal conversations offline as well.

A relatively new production called *Dzena Podcast* on Youtube, hosted by Ulpan Ramazanova, narrates about childbirth, sexual solicitation, crisis of masculinity, domestic violence and the 'Saltanat's law'. Meanwhile, for the last half a year, the 'Saltanat's law' occupied much of media attention and boost awareness of domestic violence in Kazakhstan. This high-profile murder case sheds light at how Kazakhstani women, and children, might suffer violence at the hands of their partners, or parents. While it draws a horrifying imagery of family relations, Saltanat's case instigated criminalization of 'battery' and 'light bodily harm' which, supposedly, would ensure that other women would not meet the same fate (Kim, 2024). Undoubtedly, Saltanat's case is representative of today's touchy issues, yet the media rhetoric is not constrained by discussions around domestic abuse, violence or murder trials. Roza Ashirbayeva, a media figure with more than 100.000 subscribers on Instagram and whose videos 'go viral', for instance, is one of Ulpan Ramazanova's guests on *Dzena Podcast*. There, Ulpan starts the episode by acknowledging that she 'stalked' Roza on social media to

frequently notice comments from fellow Kazakh women aged between 18-30 who reiterate that they needed someone like Roza to give them a '*shapalak*' – a slap in the face as a 'wake-up call'. Bloggers or social media figures like Roza receive recognition and acceptance because they satisfy general public's interest in specific topics and narratives. Roza's 'wake-up calls' are live broadcasts where she responds to subscribers' questions. As she shares, in 2 years these questions did not change much and those that get to be frequently asked are the following: how to pick a husband, how should household be managed, why Kazakh men are usually 'mommas' boys' [*mamsiki*], who must be responsible for a family budget and how not to end up in an unhappy marriage? In their animated conversation, Ulpan and Roza reflect upon 'how did Kazakhstani women become superbeings' in the wake of men becoming unfit within a modern marriage market.

According to them, men's 'unfitness' derives from their allegiance to patriarchy, their illusive belief that they still do not have to involve in household chores, their ignorance of how dirty shirt and socks turn into a clean suit – all meanwhile women have already become household managers and money makers at once, while men are still unable to accommodate to both. Ulpan and Roza refer to a sensitive topic of women's invisible unpaid emotional and physical labor – a responsibility to manage family members' emotional feelings, create a sense of comfort and coziness at home, remember to compile shopping lists, do the laundry and take care of children. Interestingly, I noticed similar circumstantial references to unpaid labor as participants narrated how their husbands *help* to manage household affairs [on pomogaet mne s uborkoi] – he 'helps' around the house. It is rarely a woman who helps her husband with a child, for instance, but it is usually a man who stands by if necessary. Out of 32 participants, there was an exception - Dina from Almaty who 3 weeks post-partum returned to her job and it was her husband who solely took care of their son for 5 months, while Dina earned their living.

Without delving into individuals' capacity to think critically and filter truthful information, liberation of social media and freedom of thought and expression have been positively associated. Individuals with a media presence revitalize the transmission of information and exchange of opinions, as well as impact and shape certainties and beliefs.

Besides abovementioned Youtube podcasts, I additionally personally point out *Zamandas* podcast. While it has been rigorously criticized for some of the episodes, it is still a playground where Kazakhstani creative, business figures as well as invited individual guests from different backgrounds get to debate over various pertinent and contentious actualities. The podcast, just like *Dope Soz,* is hosted by two men, who amidst criticism, uphold and permeate values that revolve around gender equality, a necessity of psychotherapy in marital relations and in life, dismantling domestic abuse, criticizing bride abductions. While inviting different women who succeeded either in finance or music, art or science, one of the hosts Kanat Beisekeyev directed a documentary titled '*Zhena*' [Wife] that uncovers the intricacies of domestic abuse in Kazakhstan.

These platforms display how different the experiences of women are, depending on their backgrounds, decision-making and the variety of circumstances one might end up in. A low transaction costs of social media allow for multiplication of certain realities and opinions, circulation of knowledge and its exchange. Both intentionally and unintentionally, public creates rhetoric, engages in it and develops new modalities to suit the reality. I was also especially interested in how Kazakh men narrate about marriage, marital responsibilities, fatherhood in a public sphere. Thus, I encountered *OskolkiPodcast* that is marketed as the platform for fathers. There, men confront the normative scripts about husbands being insensitive and occupied solely by earning a living. The topics covered by *OskolkiPodcast* range from partnered birth and its benefits, the importance of communication between partners, why marital institution persists, how contemporary 'family model' should look like and what

might go wrong, and how things have changed. In the 1970s, the host shared, women relied upon their husbands for material well-being, and they succumbed to traditional values that castigate divorce – only if these women could have the same opportunities as modern women, the divorce would have been more frequent then. One of the guests Abylaikhan Kamalladin shared how his wife filed for divorce, as he reflected upon how he under-performed in marriage and 'tested her patience'. This is not in itself a distinctive story yet bringing men's intimate reflections about marriage and relationship with woman from 'domestic' sphere to the 'public' is indicative of how accepting it is today to share what was once labelled as '*uyat*' – shameful. His narrative also reflects my findings, and the governmental statistics, where it is usually women who tend to file for divorce.

When it comes to observing the field, I also 'followed' research participants' social media. It was especially refreshing to be added into a 'best friends' section on Instagram, where users tend to post and share sensitive matters that are not intended for a broader audience. Likewise, Akerke from Astana, who today lives neolocally in New-York, has a blog dedicated to marital life, accommodations, and arrangements that it requires. One of the research participants who preferred her name to remain confidential, and has been given a pseudonym of Inabat, surprised me by managing to reconcile her motherhood, performing somewhat traditional kelin related practices (agreeing to live with his parents when they get older and wearing a headscarf, in specific occurrences) and a public role as a stand-up comedy performer. Since I follow her social media, I got to watch excerpts from her public performance where she skillfully delivered the intricacies of negotiating with husband, bargaining on taking care of children. Overall, her satirical monologue revolved around turning marital quandaries into humorous stories – observing her performance was also instrumental as it showcases how Inabat reflects on her marriage before live crowd. Interestingly, our interview depicted her differently, as a timid and homely mother of the two daughters. This is only one example of how interview

might confirm our expectations but can also deceive because humanly experiences are much deeper and multilayered.

3.5. *Chapter Summary*

The relational practices that sustain and shape family bonds continue to persist, yet the one perceives them depends on the objectives they prioritize. This chapter also showcased external perspectives or colonial and Soviet narratives, which depicted Kazakh women as passive victims in need of liberation. These perspectives failed to grasp the nuanced realities of Kazakh women's lives, where tradition and adaptability often intersect in complex ways. Alipa's story, on the other hand, challenges the reductive portrayal of Central Asian women as uniformly oppressed, instead highlighting their resilience in pursuing improved well-being through strategic marital alliances, and adaptability of traditions. In the latter part of the chapter, the discussion transitions to the contemporary media discourse, which offers a new platform for Kazakh women to voice their experiences and renegotiate their roles. Modern platforms like Youtube podcasts have become spaces where women discuss issues that were once considered private and taboo, such as marital challenges and the balance between tradition and modernity. This contemporary dialogue not only reflects the ongoing evolution of Kazakh women's identities but also underscores the continuity of care and support within family networks, even as these practices are adapted to fit the demands of a modern life.

Overall, this chapter emphasizes the dynamic and multifaced nature of Kazakh family practices, where tradition, agency, and modernity coexist in a complex interplay. It highlights how Kazakh women, both historically and in the present day, have navigated their social worlds by merging respect for tradition and a desire to assert their individual agency, ensuring their roles remain relevant and empowered within a changing cultural landscape.

4. Chapter IV. Women's Narratives: Negotiating Agency in Contemporary Kazakhstan.

4.1. *Introduction*

By situating Kazakh family practices within the framework of *bricolage*, this chapter reconciles tradition with individual agency and relationality, emphasizing how individuals do not merely accept traditions passively but engage with and reinvent practices, discursive examine them as needed. It opens with the narrative of Aidana from Astana, who co-resides with her husband's parents. Aidana's experiences and reflections epitomizes the collective realities of many informants in this study. Her story serves as the entry point into broader scholarly debates around the definitions and evolving meanings of family, marriage, and Kazakh kinship. It is imperative to underscore that while scholarly debates continue, individuals constantly make choices that are guided by both traditions and individual rationalities, and how personal narratives reflect broader social and cultural dynamics.

4.2. *Negotiating Patrilocal Norms*

Before delving into specific cases and women's narratives, it is worth noting that each dialogic interaction with the informant was distinct, shaped by the woman's interpretative repertoires, her willingness to open-up, and the unique dynamic of the conversation. Consequently, each interview sheds light on different aspects of 'doing' family, reflecting the diverse ways in which informants experience and interpret their familial roles and relationships. With this understanding in mind, I now turn to the case of Aidana from Astana. Aidana's narrative epitomizes the collective experiences of many informants in this study. As a middle-class woman co-residing patrilocally, Aidana's agency is multifaceted yet constrained by familial expectations and traditional norms. She adeptly negotiated these boundaries, establishing distinct spheres of influence both in her marital relations and with her in-laws. Her story demonstrates that traditional structural constraints of gender persist even for women who possess education, personal property, and the ability to negotiate and bargain with family

members to assert control over their personal lives. Regardless of sentiments or rationality, women's narratives indicate the instances of 'bonded' agency that is 'formed within – not beyond – ties with others' (Carter and Duncan 2017, 10). Under contextual constraints such as patrilocal co-residence, which is associated with increased domestic responsibilities, social pressures and expectations, limited privacy and autonomy, Aidana does not unconsciously follow or uncritically accept her condition. Our interview, which lasted for almost four hours, full of vibrant reflections, examples, and storylines, emphasizes how personal lives are more nuanced than rational choices or traditional scripts of behavior.

Despite constraints imposed by the living arrangement, Aidana asserted her agency and achieved her goals by leveraging her role as the emotional caretaker. She constructed a source of informal power by developing strategies to negotiate power and carve out spheres of influence within household by performing emotional labor. Emotional labor, defined as the process of managing feelings to fulfill emotional requirements of a relationship, is associated with the effort invested by one partner, typically women, in providing emotional support and maintaining harmony (Hochschild 1983). While managing emotional well-being of the family can become a source of informal power, performing a disproportionate share of emotional labor in marriage can turn into a burden (Erickson 2005). Most informants in my research reported being primarily responsible for emotional management within their marriages. For instance, women might exercise agency in subtle and covert ways, they narrated how they tend accommodate to husbands' and in-laws' temper and spirits by engaging in indirect forms of influence rather than overtly expressing dissent. They employ conformity and compliance as strategic tools for managing familial relations – this might include resorting to manipulations, maintaining a calm demeanor or, as one of the informants' Inabat shared: 'I am not a confrontational person. If my husband gets angry, I just stay silent because if I say something back, it will escalate into a full-blown argument. I usually just wait until he calms down, and

then he apologizes. That's when I approach him, with tears in my eyes, and he listens'. In Kazakhstan, the interplay between emotional labor and informal power is especially pronounced due to cultural expectations surrounding gender and family dynamics. A capacity to perform emotional labor effectively can enhance a woman's standing within her family and community, providing her with a non-traditional avenue to assert her agency, negotiate for her needs and desires and influence marital outcomes (Kudaibergenova 2018).

While some find this role beneficial, enabling them to exert a certain level of influence and control, others experience it as a burden, contributing to their mental strain. For Aidana specifically, performing emotional labor meant to exert a form of subtle control and power over her husband by ensuring that their marital bond remains strong despite the external pressures of the extended family, navigating her husband's loyalties to his family while also asserting her own desires. What is more important, she strategically uses emotional labor to balance between her role as a wife and *kelin*.

Aidana shared how her husband's reluctance to change their current patrilocal co-residence pattern has turned into a considerable grind as she is 'always irritated at home – it is not my home, this is not my kitchen, these are not my groceries' – their current living arrangement does not satisfy neither pre-marital agreements nor Aidana's personal expectations from marriage. Her story is indicative of power imbalances between *kelin* (daughter-in-law in Kazakh) and in-laws, and emotional bonds and attachments within a newlywed couple. Patrilocal co-residence turned into a condition that deteriorated relationships with her husband and her mother-in-law who insists that 'I will intrude into your family, because he is my son'. Aidana narrated in length how, because of her in-laws, she is unable to manage her personal schedule and is expected to report on her whereabouts.

She emphasized emotional engagement with her mother-in-law, partly because of acknowledging her strong identification with performing as *kelin* – it reinvokes anger and

disappointment because Aidana does not uncritically accept this gendered traditional role. By means of small daily interactions between *kelin* and mother-in-law, the 'cultural concept of *kelin*' that is associated with 'the burden of *kelin's* household activities' and 'the most marginalized members of their families' is pushed forward (Kudaibergenova 2018, 380). She acts differently from what is expected from *kelin* in her husband's family system, Aidana plans to pursue her educational aspirations and apply for a master's degree in Italy. Contextually, Aidana must deal with power-imbalance set within emotional relations with her husband, and above else with her husband's mother. She was discursively critical of consequences of associating *kelin* with a homemaker model because she must make choices in relation to others and carry through her actions under her in-laws' supervision.

In the hierarchical structure of her husband's family, the mother-in-law holds significant authority, and Aidana is expected to manage this relationship with care. In relations with her mother-in-law, Aidana appeals to argumentative and other communicative strategies to 'fulfill pragmatic goals of mediation' and to relieve an 'escalating spiral of hostility' (Greco Morasso 2009, 332). By selectively adopting aspects of a traditional role as *kelin*, Aidana maintains a relationship with her mother-in-law, while remaining detached from all the expectations. Thus, Aidana co-resides patrilocally, yet spends more quality time with her family of origin. Nonetheless, she sometimes resorts to more assertive forms of agency, unlike the traditional expectation of deference, she openly challenges certain decisions or opinions set by her mother-in-law, engaging in direct conversations. By openly confronting issues and advocating for her own needs, both with her husband and in-laws, Aidana asserts her agency within the household structure that typically privileges the authority of the elder generation.

Furthermore, Aidana contributes economically to the household, which enhances her bargaining capacity. By engaging in paid employment and contributing financially, most informants gain greater autonomy. This economic involvement challenges traditional gender

roles, shifts power dynamics and facilitates a sense of independence, allowing women to negotiate more effectively (Kandiyoti 1988, 47). While financial independence can challenge traditional gender norms and strengthen women's negotiating power, it is still required to navigate familial obligations and societal norms. She makes calculated decisions regarding resource allocation yet contributes to her in-laws' household by buying groceries or gifts, when necessary. Aidana is responsible for domestic duties that are traditionally assigned to women, yet her responsibilities are selective – she cleans, but does not cook. For instance, when she is busy and her husband did not eat, she regards it as 'his problem', because he is a grown-up man and can attend to his needs by himself. What is more important, Aidana also taught her husband to cook several dishes – this is one of the examples of how she navigated complex family dynamics, often mediating conflicts, and ensuring emotional well-being to reassure her mother-in-law that her son is full, while Aidana does not have to service him.

Lastly, Aidana underscored how her husband chooses to remain in his 'comfort zone' without planning to get a mortgage on their separate apartment, he drives his parents' car and does not consider their couple as an independent unit. Aidana's relationship with her husband were articulated through a desire to both maximize her autonomy and to propel him to assume a responsibility for their nuclear family 'as a man'. She described how she spent the last year contemplating divorce, yet she did not act on it because she plans to 'observe' her husband for 'one or two years' and if things do not change, then Aidana would 'choose herself' and apply for divorce. During our dialogic interactions, Aidana casually mentioned that she also experiences shame and embarrassment for 'laying a scheme' for a 'way out' by not considering her marriage as 'everlasting' but preparing for the worst-case scenario. I followed up by clarifying what she did to 'prepare'? With support of her mother, Aidana managed to save up money to buy her own apartment attributing it to the belief that 'we live in Kazakhstan, and I have to have a place to escape, if needed'. Her husband is aware of this plan. Aidana's

narratives showcase reactive agentic force as she purchased an apartment separately from her husband, yet she also referred to the feelings of vulnerability and affection that preclude her from applying for divorce. She elaborated that it seems like 'preparing for divorce at the day of your wedding'. Later, Aidana added that she notices how her husband too experiences discomfort from his parents' excessive guardianship; she empathizes with him even if he whiles away the time in inertia and does not purposefully interfere into the existing dynamic. Accordingly, Aidana's rationality is accompanied with empathy, vulnerability, shame, and regret.

Emotional attachment and worries are usually counterposed to rationality, yet when it comes to personal lives and intimacies, this dichotomy is perhaps what one might expect. Thus, due to sentiments and the value of being married, Aidana gives their relationship time to evolve and progress, by postponing divorce. Further to this, Aidana reflected upon her sense of irrelevance to her husband's family system as 'everyone is by himself – not harmonious, nor friendly', she also does not experience a sense of belonging as their family practices remain alien. Aidana said how 'his parents welcome only those traditions that benefit them, other traditions remain unattended' – she recalled an interaction with her mother-in-law:

> *Mother-in-law: we welcomed you into our family, your husband is my son – and I will intrude into your family.*
>
> *Aidana: I did not mean to intrude into your family, I wanted to build a family of my own.*

Aidana complained how unfair it is to choose from 'traditions' only those that concern *kelin*. Her mentioning of this quick interaction indicates how a theoretical counterposition of tradition and modernity does not respond to practical realities of doing family. On the one hand, according to patrilineal expectations, Aidana is regarded as the member of her husband's family network, including his parents and relatives. There, co-residence, while helps to reduce

financial pressures for newlyweds, is also seen as means of fostering closer bonds among family member – when in fact, it contributes to misunderstandings. Furthermore, Aidana continues to receive both emotional and financial support from her natal family. The practice of newlyweds receiving support from relatives is common in Kazakhstan, however Aidana's apartment is intended less for the nuclear family's needs and more as a 'security asset', offering her a sense of autonomy.

This account can be interpreted as a domestic conflict or misunderstanding, yet it also showcases how individuals get to reinvent traditions and be selective. Thus, Aidana's mother-in-law expects her to fulfill *kelin* duties, and 'take care of her son', yet cannot fully integrate Aidana into the family through forms of support, or by not performing as a competitor. This pattern to varying degrees, was observed in the narratives of 12 informants. Thus, the terms 'left her family of origin' to 'enter the husband's family' are merely euphemisms that obscure what may happen, or do not account for the variety of possible scenarios and interactions between family members. The anticipated strengthening of kinship ties from co-residence often fail to materialize due to personality differences, unwillingness to understand and communicate openly, and other less visible factors. For a while anthropologists denied application of evolutionary paradigm to the analysis of kinship and traditions, so the interplay between human agency, behavioral plasticity and cultural practices remained understudied. Traditions can be seen as cultural practices that are transmitted through generations to maintain a group cohesion and stability. According to evolutionary anthropologists, these traditions evolve over time through mechanisms similar to natural selection – there, individuals choose from available practices and retain those that are beneficial, whilst maladaptive practices are discarded (Henrich and McElreath 2003). Further, kinship structures have always been associated with maximizing reproductive success to ensure the continuity of generations and provide structured systems of congenial relations. Within these structures, individuals get to exercise agency or

modify behaviors to adapt, examine and reshape practices – accordingly, choices and actions yield cultural innovations and changes in social norms, conditions, and cultural wisdoms (Laland and Brown 2011, 17).

Likewise, most of the informants postpone childbearing for different reasons, many of which reflect broader socio-economic trends and cultural shifts. For Aidana, seeing higher education as a crucial step towards securing a well-paying job meant to allot time, energy, and space to prepare for applying and completing an advanced degree. The cost of living in urban areas is generally higher, prompting women to delay childbearing until they feel financially secure. Most newlyweds rely on dual income to maintain their standard of living; thus, women tend to prioritize contributing economically to the household over childbearing. For Aidana, personal autonomy and lifestyle choices, her husband's reliance on extended family support, the lack of financial resources to support a separate household – all affect her decision-making in marriage.

As the interview proceeded, Aidana pondered over a series of questions as to why it is her mother who helps her with finances to buy an apartment, while Aidana is now a member of her husband's family system? She argued that women tend to be more vulnerable than men due to childbearing, she also recalled seeing series of TikTok videos, where Kazakh married women shared how it is their parents who help and assist newlyweds, while groom's relatives remain indifferent. In her narratives, marriage appeared as both an emotional and relational project that transforms under different circumstances and requires individual actors to adapt.

Women's reflexive accounts reveal complex forms of bargaining, negotiating, reasoning, adapting, discursively examining traditional and gendered norms of behavior, and advancing personal interests – likewise, the notion of agency becomes central in understanding family practices. Choice and agency account for behavior, and suggest that family members are self-determining agents who, nonetheless, act and decide out of consideration for structural

constraints, and relational commitments within a nuclear family and with extended kin. From the interviews with 32 married women, I now tend to gravitate towards considering family, and marriage as social arenas or the '…sites of negotiation, exchange, power, conflict, and inequality' (Cohen and MacCartney 2004, 185-186). Women's narratives suggest that family practices, depending on newlyweds' residence patterns, have an impact on women's performances of agency in five main domains: decision-making power, caregiving and domestic work, economic independence, social relationships, and freedom of choice. Outside of scholarly articles and cultural truths, behind closed doors, husband-wife relationships and the interplay with extended kin are replete with contradictions, where love and conflict, emotions and rationality go hand in hand and where 'disagreement, competition, and conflict can coexist with order, stability, and cooperation' (Mabry et al 2004, 94).

4.3. *Neolocal Arrangement*

To introduce the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of physical and emotional proximity and interplay with parents or relatives, I would like to compare Aidana's co-residence with Gulnaz's neolocal arrangement. The main difference between the stories of Aidana and Gulnaz is that Gulnaz anticipated the potential pressures that proximity to her husband's parents and relatives could place on their nuclear family. Therefore, Gulnaz took deliberate proactive steps by suggesting and ultimately moving neolocally, not only to avoid future tensions but also to ensure that conflicts never had the chance to emerge. Gulnaz is married for 5 years and lives in Almaty, while her natal family and in-laws reside in Kostanay in the northern part of Kazakhstan. In Gulnaz's neolocal setting, the physical distance from both sets of parents is associated with a sense of autonomy. According to her narrative, she not only manages the family budget and daily logistics but also plays an equal role in major decision-making – for instance, the decision to relocate from Kostanay to Almaty was made at her suggestion.

By the middle of our dialogic interaction, Gulnaz revealed that her suggestion for their neolocal move was meant to facilitate her husband's physical and emotional distancing and separation from his parents, as Gulnaz had assumed – based on other women's experiences, her own observations and the general social environment and rhetoric – that her husband might be dependent on his parents' opinions and approval. She emphasized that during their dating period, her husband used to call his mother '10 times a day' and 'send photos as if it was necessary to report every step' – this behavior left her puzzled and she did not want it to continue and affect their marital dynamics. Furthermore, she emphasized that at the beginning, when family members get acquainted, relatives want to seem 'easygoing and nice', and it is impossible to gain an understanding of an individual's genuine reactions, and authentic opinions.

Over time, Gulnaz observed that her husband's relatives influence his parents decision-making and perceptions, which in turn leads to affecting him and their nuclear family dynamic. The interpretative repertoire of '*husband not being separated from his parents*' reappeared in Gulnaz's narrative several times as she stated how:

> *I managed to separate the child from the family – my husband from his parent. More from his mother, from both parents, but more from his mother. Later, I started to notice that I had gained some authority – he listens to me now.* (Gulnaz)

Initially, her husband was content with staying in Kostanay and growing their family there, while Gulnaz believed that 'Kostanay was not the limit, neither of his potential nor mine'. In order to mitigate potential tensions with in-laws, she strategically planned to suggest the move – Gulnaz knew that neolocal living arrangement would not only create distance from relatives, but it also aligns with her husband's professional aspirations and opportunities in Almaty. Therefore, she framed the move as beneficial for both his career advancement and their autonomy as a nuclear family.

Today, their independent household allows her to assert both purposeful and strategic forms of agency, thus in her narrative construction, she put an emphasis on the needs of her nuclear family, their own interests, and strategies; the narrative did not highlight the relationships with in-laws or other extended family members, or the quality of these relationships per se. The comparison between Aidana and Gulnaz is particularly important as it reveals how performance of agency does not only depend on personal will or assertiveness of a woman but is highly contingent upon the structural context of where and with whom she lives. Upon their move to Almaty, her husband took some time to initiate his business endeavors. Gulnaz understood that business takes time, yet it could potentially provide for them in the long-term. While Gulnaz was quite reserved in her speech, yet she summarized their first years of marriage as following:

> *I understood that I needed to give him the freedom to choose and grow, I did not restrict him with the idea that he is a man and must be a breadwinner. We agreed that for the first two years he would focus on establishing himself as a businessman, creating projects, and bringing them to life. However, if nothing worked out, then after two years he would get a stable job. At that time, we relied entirely on my salary – 150.000 tenge*. (Gulnaz)

Following her narrative, for the first two years of their marital life in Almaty, Gulnaz had to consciously step up and assume the financial responsibility for their family's needs. Her reflection is also indicative of how newlyweds practically challenge and redefine the traditional patriarchal model of the 'woman as homemaker' and 'man as breadwinner', which reflects a trend towards equitable relationships. Likewise, her narrative discloses that she prioritized living neolocally, even if it involved financial challenges, because it offered autonomy from in-laws' potential interference and it also supported her husband's long-term career-fulfillment.

4.4. *Kazakh Kinship and Patrilineality*

In Kazakhstan, it is common to be asked 'which region are you from?' or 'which tribe or clan do you belong to?'. These questions help to create a profile and to identify with which kinship-based network an individual is associated with. In Kazakhstan, upon marriage, newlyweds are expected to co-reside with a groom's parents to internalize the norms of a family, get familiar with traditions and practices – it can be attributed to a 'collective psychology of Kazakh ethnos' (Kabakova and Maulsharif 2012, 640). On the one hand, a sense of belonging that derives from an actual biological relatedness is key in understanding a prevalence of patrilocal living arrangements. On the other hand, while a sense of belonging derives from a norm of patrilineality and upholds patrilocal living arrangements, the ways in which individuals perform and appropriate these norms differ. While interlocutors in this study chose to narrate about the perplexities of sharing household with parents-in-law, for instance, they also noted how kinship networks also serve to support newlyweds during the first years of marriage by offering financial or emotional assistance. What is more interesting, it seems that scholarship is not succeeding in this catch-up game with individuals' actual performance of cultural truths and traditional practices, as daily interactions are not always self-explanatory as they also do not follow a particular script of how things ought to be done or understood.

Traditionally, Kazakh families were organized around nomadic pastoralism, where *ayul*[17] or the extended family served as the fundamental social unit. Patrilineality, a norm of emphasizing lineage through a male line, plays an integral part in structuring family relations, which reflects the dominance of a paternal line and influences social interactions and marriage practices (Schatz 2004). For Kazakhs, patrilineality or patrilineages overlap

[17] Auyl refers to a rural village or a community, characterized by close-knit social structures. It encompasses not only a community or a physical space, but also a cultural dynamic of rural life in Kazakhstan (Werner 2009, 10).

with elders' expectation that newlyweds, upon marriage, would integrate into groom's natal kin and co-reside with his family for the first years, or more. Likewise, practices that derive from the custom of patrilineality uphold patrilocal co-residence, respect to elders, affinity to children, being knowledgeable of traditions and a customary family law (Kim 2023, 252). Although, relatedness that is based upon patrilineal descent infers *being* over *doing* which sends unequivocal messages about the ways in which relatedness and customary laws impact individual decision-makers.

Thereafter, even if patrilineality persists, women may assert their interests and preferences for living arrangements, redefining gender roles, and taking an upper hand in marital decision-making. Accordingly, reconciling traditional customs with modern values of gender equality become apparent in urban family practices. This reflects informants' narratives, suggesting that newlyweds often strategically choose to live with their relatives as a means to save money and accumulate resources for their future. For urban middle-class Kazakh newlyweds, co-residence allows the couple to minimize expenses, such as rent and utilities, and build financial stability, which can be crucial for their long-term goals. Moreover, co-residential arrangement can also include non-monetary benefits such as shared responsibilities in childcare or household chores, which can allow both the husband and wife to focus on their careers or studies. Likewise, the decision to co-reside with parents or in-laws is not merely a reflection of tradition or familial obligation but can also be a calculated strategy aimed at financial accumulation. Furthermore, for most of the informants, this arrangement was a temporary measure, with the couples planning to move out once they have achieved specific financial goals.

Throughout my research, I encountered matrilocal co-residence only once, as most co-residence situations were patrilocal. These patrilocal arrangements were far more common and aligned with traditional expectations and social norms. In patrilineal societies, patrilocal

residence is common as it reinforces the significance of a paternal lineage for upholding family heritage and a social structure. This practice ensures that valuable resources such as property and wealth, or commodities such as ancestral legacy and progeny, would remain within a male lineage (Strassman and Kuparati 2016, 118). When newlyweds move in with a groom's parents, it is deemed that the continuity of a paternal lineage is preserved. What is more important, this living setup has been associated with a set of broader societal norms and practices, where bride is expected to integrate and assimilate into groom's family. The dynamics can vary significantly, depending on the personalities involved and the existing relationships within the household. While some women end up in supportive environments where they are treated as integral members of the family, others may struggle with a lack of autonomy or conflict. One informant expressed regret over the lack of agency she felt in her marital decision-making, stating 'It would have been better if I had a chance to choose not only my husband, but his family as well – however, this was impossible, as I met his parents only after the marriage proposal'. This highlights the challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, in contexts where marriage is not just a union between two people, but an integration into a larger kinship network. The informant's reflection underscores the importance of familial dynamics in marriage, and how the inability to assess or choose one's in-laws beforehand can lead to unforeseen difficulties. It also showcases the broader familial approval and arrangements over the individual's preferences. Often limiting the agency of women in these decisions.

The concept of *kelin* is a critical aspect of this discourse. *Kelin* is expected to fulfill specific duties and follow through family traditions, which can often place them in subordinate roles within the household hierarchy (Thibault 2018, 92). For instance, Kudaibergenova (2018, 45) describes a case where a young bride is expected to take on extensive household duties immediately after marriage, demonstrating the practical

implications of patrilocal living arrangement. Thibault (2018, 92) presents an example of *kelin* who must adhere to strict codes of conduct and perform daily rituals to honor her spouse's family, reflecting the cultural expectations placed on her. Following a degree to which patrilineality plays into everyday realities, 'incompliance' may 'evoke social disapproval and exclusion. From the *kelin*'s perspective, resisting the desires of *qaiynene* (mother-in-law) may lead to a familial conflict, disruption in the kinship relations and cause divorce' (Kim 2023, 255).

Patrilineages ensure a 'key source of person's social identity' (Nathan 2018, 1). This system creates predictability and lays out specific duties and responsibilities, family etiquette and moral codes, norms of behavior and marriage regulations. The patrilocal living set up can intensify the pressures on women, limiting their autonomy and reinforcing gendered hierarchies. A proximity to the husband's family often subjects women to scrutiny and reinforces their subordinate status within household (Werner 2009). Nonetheless, despite these constraints, the '*kelin* discourse' is not solely a source of oppression, it also provides a framework within which women negotiate their roles. In other words, while kelin role can be restrictive, it offers women a platform to gain respect by managing their duties, performing emotional labor, demonstrating nuanced forms of agency that is performed within the boundaries of patrilineal and patrilocal systems (Kudaibergenova 2018). The role of *kelin* within Kazakh kinship structures highlights the enduring influence of traditional norms on contemporary family practices. While the expectations placed upon women have evolved over time, the core principles of respect and familial duty remain central. The *kelin* is not only a figure of integration into the husband's family system but also a key player in the preservation of cultural values. As Kazakh society continues to modernize, the *kelin* role will likely continue to adapt, balancing tradition with the emerging aspirations of women for greater autonomy and self-determination.

4.5. *Reconciling Marriage, Family and Kinship*

The attempts to comprehend what marriage or family, across historical biographical and spatial contexts, may end up as an insufficient effort because it requires to wrap our minds around a large body of complex social relationships. A varied literature has been accumulated concerning kinship, family, and marriage. Scholars find themselves in a continuous loop of arguing and debating whether definitions can be identified and distinguished, or how 'all presuppositions about how social systems work are not equally consistent either internally or with the evidence…' (Schneider 1984, 5).

The phenomena of family and marriage are 'elusive and multifaceted', private and personal, sometimes self-explanatory, and full of folk wisdoms. Family and marriage are social institutions that have sacred moral connotations, as they maintain and allow for the variety of family practices by expanding individuals' decision-making horizons. It clings to the romanticized images of a family, as well as promotes the quest for 'utility gains' from marriage in the pursuit of personal happiness. The mythology of family and marriage, and the emotional essence of family life, produce ambiguity in both approaching the phenomena from a scientific standpoint, and experiencing and sharing it. However, it does not mean that researching family and marriage is beyond a scientific reach. Situating a human object as the object of knowledge implies studying marriage and family by employing research strategies from both social and behavioral sciences. While researching, one can pick and choose a definition that fits his agenda. What lies at the heart of kinship relations? According to Borneman (2006, 30), the answer would depend on the choice of a paradigm and 'the ideological inclinations of the researcher', thus anthropologists have granted authority to 'power, gender…and sex…Without rigorously justifying the violent hierarchies that result from such prioritizing'. There is a diverse array of family structures, actions and living arrangements and most of the definitions do not apply when approached outside of the individualization theories, or without

understanding personal lives and a multiplicity of everyday family practices (Duncan and Carter 2022).

According to Waite (1995, 498), marriage is the long-term voluntary contract that 'facilitates emotional investment in the relationship, as it also 'allows the partners to make choices that carry immediate costs…' . It appears as a dynamic system that subsists by virtue of people making choices and acting for the benefit of all family members. This is because 'marriage is stretched to fit and made to serve the practical goals and situations of actual and diverse peoples…' (Borneman 2006, 40). When individuals decide to marry, they assume that they would be better of married than single, and by this contractual obligation, every family member is expected to act for the benefit of all. Neither family nor marriage are pre-social nor pre-historical (Collier 1982). Family is by itself a socially recognized group of individuals who might be connected emotionally and by blood, as they also might cohabitate or reside in the same housing establishment (Kendall 2014). Family, therefore, is a complex network of related individuals (Silverstein 2006, 166). Family can schematically be divided into 2 groups: *cognatic* or relatives from maternal side, and *agnatic* or relatives from paternal side (Mair 1997).

Marriage, on the other hand, is both socially and legally recognized social contract between the two and is integral to the creation of a family per se. Definitions oftentimes highlight the ideas behind grand theories and notion systems, but these are rarely internally coherent. This is because individuals rarely decide and act upon laws of nature or society, on contrary, they perform using agency and depending on personal preferences and context. Following Morgan's (1996) redefinition of the field of family studies into 'family practices', the emphasis shifted away from definitions towards understanding the ways in which individual actors 'do' family in their daily lives. A modern and a somewhat individualized society offer 'promethean' and exclusive family forms, where 'individual agency triumphs over social structure and reflexivity

replaces habit' requires the 'frames of understanding' to be quickly changing and evolving in response to how individuals conduct their personal lives (Duncan and Carter 2022, 50-51).

It has quickly become obvious that the definitions of 'marriage' and 'family' are far from being the plain derivatives of hypotheses, theories, and doctrines. Depending on the framework of choice, kinship studies can be committed to upgrading definitions and systematizing incoherent social interactions and feelings, or it can be predominantly concerned with a nuclear conjugal family. Family can encompass 'different degrees of coordination along varied lines of kinship and responsibility' (Schultz 1990, 600). Therefore, kinship studies can and should also be considered as practical. A 'practical kinship', which is associated with the Anglo-Saxon 'new kinship', implies delving into the symbols and feelings that give kinship it's meaning. It '…requires restoring each person's words, words of experience and interaction…It implies reflecting on the collective frameworks of singular experiences and interactions' (Weber 2005, 16).

Likewise, in order not to flounder between diverse hypotheses, theories, doctrines and perspectives, I need to set some boundaries. First, the primary function of kinship is to generate 'marriage possibilities and impossibilities', this is the playground where the matrimonial and familial options get to be 'performed' and 'transferred' into real-life experiences (Godelier 2012, 704). Second, the ties between individuals, created by kinship, have much more to do with symbolisms and philosophy than with social sciences. Third, all societies set their own historically and culturally specific limits on the uses of sex, exchange of gifts or other rituals and moral values, or forms of alliances (Fortes 1969). Lastly, it is crucial to remain open for the infinite variations in marriage, family, inheritance and descent, alliances, gender relations and inequalities, sexual relations and transformations of social gendered roles, and other stratifications and categories of somehow related, or unrelated, individuals (Goody 2013; Borneman 1997).

4.6. *Informants' Definitions*

When it comes to informants' perceptions of family, marriage, and kinship relations, then Dayana from Almaty who lives in patrilocal nearby arrangement, places significant importance on personal space and autonomy within her marriage. She insisted on living separately from her in-laws to avoid conflicts – this decision highlights her desire to create a distinct and independent family unit. When asked about marriage, Dayana emphasized the importance of maintaining her financial independence, even when relying on her husband for major expenses, and keeping the relationship with her in-laws positive and respectful, aided by the physical distance and her mother-in-law's busy lifestyle. She described her in-laws as supportive and non-intrusive, which allows Dayana to maintain her autonomy while enjoying a good relationship with them. Furthermore, she views marriage as a partnership where both spouses contribute to household responsibilities and decision-making. She followed up by sharing that:

> *My husband works full-time. I am also working full-time, because our daughter needs attention for 24/7 – isn't it a full-time job, then? If he 'helps' me around household chores, then I guess, it is me who is helping him more.* (Dayana)

Her husband's involvement in childcare and support for her entrepreneurial endeavors showcases a collaborative dynamic. Regardless of their living arrangement, Dayana feels confident in pursuing her aspirations, attributing this to her personal background, which includes financial independence and parental support, as well as the understanding nature of her husband. Motivated by the perception that her husband's life remained largely unchanged after the birth of their daughter, Dayana sought to regain a sense of agency. Despite her initial role as a stay-at-home mother, Dayana expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement, feeling confined by the responsibilities of domestic life. She attributed her ability to pursue business endeavors to the financial independence gained from renting out her apartment in Astana, as well as the support from her parents and the quality education they had invested in. After

discussing her aspirations with her husband, she persuaded him to assist her in opening a flower shop, fulfilling her entrepreneurial ambitions.

Overall, her narrative is indicative of selective adherence to traditions, where she internalizes and performs only those that align with her values and priorities. She acknowledges the cultural expectations but navigates them in a way that facilitates her autonomy and maintains personal space. For instance, following the birth of their child. Dayana's mother-in-law suggested that they cohabitate for 40 days – a customary period in Kazakh tradition during which the extended family takes care of new mothers and provides postpartum support. In Kazakh culture, this practice reflects a strong role of kinship in supporting family members during significant life transitions, particularly childbirth. However, this suggestion was initially made to her son, who then relayed it to Dayana. Dayana declined the offer, expressing the concern that living with her in-laws might strain their relationship. She feared that the close daily interactions associated with cohabitation could lead to misunderstandings, potentially jeopardizing the long-term harmony between them.

Driven by deliberate and pragmatic decisions, Dina from Almaty who lives bilocally emphasizes an equal partnership in her marriage, insisting on shared responsibilities and mutual respect. She negotiated the terms of their living arrangements and household duties to ensure that she and her husband contribute equally. Her focus on practical aspects of marriage reflects a modern and egalitarian perspective, which is evident in Dina's commitment to her career and financial contribution to the family – it underscores her perception of marriage as a partnership where both spouses support each-others' personal and professional goals. Her husband's parents expressed their desire to co-reside with newlyweds, yet Dina and her husband live separately from both sets of parents because Dina successfully negotiated their living arrangements to ensure independence.

His mother is from Kyzylorda, Southern Kazakhstan – so they did not even consider nearby residence, co-residence was the primary option. I told him that he could live with his parents if he wants. I am not against that. However, I am not going to marry you, there is no point in marriage if we would co-reside with your parents. It was very important to discuss our living arrangement prior to marriage – our parents had to remain in the past, our family was the main thing. (Dina)

Her narratives also indicate that her parents are occasionally involved in childcare, which reflects a pragmatic approach to utilizing available support while maintaining autonomy. Despite the norms of patrilineality, most of the informants shared that they tend to entrust their children to their own natal kin rather than to their husband's parents. This preference is shaped by the perceived dependability and emotional security provided by the natal family (Yanagisako and Collier 1987).

Symbat and her husband have experienced frequent relocations, living neolocally in multiple countries, and co-residing with his parents for extended periods during the early stages of their marriage. Likewise, her perception of family is dynamic and adaptable, shaped by frequent relocations and varying living arrangements. The decision to co-reside patrilocally initially was to strengthen family bonds before moving abroad – despite finding it challenging, Symbat appreciated the support and understanding from her mother-in-law. Nonetheless, the early years of her marriage involved significant emotional challenges, including nightly tears and feelings of inadequacy in fulfilling expected roles.

I cried myself to sleep. My husband used to lecture me on the things I did wrong during the day. But as time passed, we went through pritirka (accommodation period), and later, we developed better communication strategies. Neolocal experience helped us to become closer. (Symbat)

These struggles highlight the adjustment period many women face when integrating into their spouse's family and household dynamics. The initial years of marriage are typically associated with significant adjustments as newlyweds learn to live together and develop shared routines and manage their responsibilities. While adapting to cohabitating with a spouse might be challenging, integrating into the spouse's family network often presents additional complexities and misunderstandings (Bryant and Conger 1999; Curran and McDaniel 2015).

Symbat handles most of domestic tasks, including cooking and cleaning, taking care of their two children, although her husband occasionally helps, particularly when she is overwhelmed. Even if most of the household chores is Symbat's responisibility, her narrative highlights the importance of a supportive partnership. She explained it as husband's involvement in decision-making, maintaining open communication, being responsible for major expenses and his emotional support and guidance play an integral role in making their relationship fulfilling. Interestingly, when living with her in-laws, her mother-in-law took over kitchen responsibilities, which Symbat respects as part of their household dynamic, and views it as a considerable assistance as it alleviates her burdens, allowing to focus on other responsibilities. By the end of the interview, she opened-up about her husband's close ties with his mother, and his consultations regarding significant matters. Symbat found this challenging, but she came to appreciate the support and wisdom his mother provides. This consultative approach extends to their broader family decision-making dynamic, reflecting a blend of respect and practicality in kinship relations. However, she also noted changes in the 'consultative dynamic with his mother' – during periods when they lived neolocally, her husband began to distance himself from his mother and instead sought to Symbat's counsel.

Her narratives are somewhat different from other informants' stories and emphasize navigating traditions with a balance of respect and adaptation. For instance, Symbat respects her mother-in-law's domain in the kitchen and finds ways to coexist harmoniously. The

frequent relocations and lack of permanent home have influenced her perception of family and stability. Despite these challenges, the newlywed's ability to adjust, improve their communication and make joint decisions showcases their agency as resilience. Symbat's evolving relationship with her husband, characterized by open communication and mutual support, highlights the importance of partnership and shared decision-making in contemporary family practices.

In her interview, Erkezhan's definitions of family, marriage, and kinship revolve around themes of respect, responsibility, and interdependence, influenced by her traditional upbringing. It was evident from the outset that this interview would be distinct, as when Erkezhan was asked about how they met and how their love story began, she responded: 'He saw me wearing a headscarf, which I had forgotten to take off after my brother's *nikyah*[18] ceremony, and this is when my future husband envisioned me as his bride'. This unexpected moment, she explained, led him to appreciate her appearance in traditional bridal attire, marking the beginning of their courtship – in her narrative, Erkezhan frequently incorporated Kazakh terminology, enriching her story with cultural nuances specific to her context. Words such as *zhana kelyn* (new bride), *uidyn kishkentai kelyny* (household's youngest bride), *uyat bolady* (it would cause shame), *abysyn* (husband's brother's wife) were used to provide depth to her experiences, upholding that traditional Kazakh customs play a significant role in her daily life. When asked about communication with her husband, Erkezhan too reflected in Kazakh – she expressed a desire to hire a cleaning service for their large home, especially given the added physical demands during pregnancy. However, her husband expressed concerns about the security implications of inviting strangers into their home, fearing potential theft. He

[18] Nikyah, also known as nikah, is an Islamic marriage contract and a fundamental element of an Islamic marriage ceremony. The nikah is a legal agreement between the bride and the groom and involves both parties agreeing to the marriage under terms they stipulate in the contract (Ahmed An-Naim, 2002).

advised a cautious approach, encapsulated in Kazakh '*zhai zhai akyryn iste'*, which translates as 'do it carefully, step by step, slightly'.

Today, Erkezhan and her husband co-reside patrilocally in Astana, and her family dynamics reveal that respect towards parents-in-law is central, as reflected in her comments about maintaining her duties at home and adjusting her behavior to fit the expectations of her husband's family. She also highlighted the distinct roles of men and women, particularly her own responsibility for household chores and the financial provider role of her husband. At only 19 years old, Erkezhan is significantly younger than many other women in this study. She is still completing her bachelor's degree, which limits her professional independence compared to other women who may already have jobs or apartments. Unlike other women who may own their own apartments or have careers, Erkezhan does not yet have a job or property of her own. This creates a dependency on her husband and his family, further reinforcing traditional gender roles and limits her freedom in decision-making. Because her husband is the only son, it is expected that they will continue living with his parents, an arrangement that prevents Erkezhan from pursuing her plans for a master's degree abroad. She carefully emphasized the emotional distress this causes her, as she feels her personal ambitions are constrained by the family's expectations and her role within the household. Furthermore, Erkezhan lives 20 minutes outside Astana in Koyandy, which is not a cosmopolitan center. This setting influences her social interactions and decisions in ways that differ from women living in urban areas. Living in a smaller community with her in-laws also means she faces more traditional expectations regarding kinship and family roles. In her questionnaire, she indicated that major family decisions are made collaboratively, with consultation involving both her and her husband's parents, responding with 'agree'. Her response stands in contrast to the responses of other women in the study, who predominantly answered 'disagree', reflecting a greater degree of autonomy in their decision-making.

4.7. *Beyond Conventional Residence Patterns*

Aliya's case of matrilocal co-residence is particularly unexpected and noteworthy. Our interview was scheduled as the last among the others, and initially, she did not disclose that their residence pattern was not only matrilocal but that she and her husband had been co-residing with her parents for nearly five years. Interestingly, during the interview, Aliya did not present their residence arrangement as anything extraordinary. For her, it was simply their way of living, emerging naturally from their mutual decision-making as a couple. This disclosure was surprising, especially considering that other informants had mentioned knowing married couples who also lived with the bride's parents, but I had not previously had direct contact with or the opportunity to interview such couples personally. The unexpected nature of Aliya's situation lies in the fact that matrilocal co-residence, where newlyweds live with the bride's parents, is generally less common in Kazakhstan. Traditional norms typically favor patrilocal residence, where the couple lives near or with the groom's family. Scholarship on Central Asian family practices, such as Werner (2009) and Liversage (2013) suggest that while matrilocal residence can occur, it often does so under specific circumstances, such as economic necessity, the lack of male heirs in the bride's family. Aliya's case, however, does not appear to fit neatly into those categories, because she has both sister and brother, and Aliya and her husband have their own apartment in Almaty which is under renovation. This intriguing deviation from the more widely observed residence patterns highlights the flexibility and diversity of contemporary marital arrangements in Kazakhstan.

Hypothetically, if matrilocal co-residence were as prevalent[19], it would likely impose similar constraints as patrilocal co-residence. Similar to patrilocal co-residence, matrilocal cohabitation is associated with limited autonomy in making independent choices; while a bride

[19] Patrilocal residence, where a married couple lives with or near the husband's family, is prevalent in Kazakhstan due to a combination of historical, cultural, and social factors. Most importantly, because Kazakh society is organized around patrilineality, where lineage is traced through male line (Kudaibergenova 2018).

might need to balance her roles as both a daughter and a wife, a groom might need to adapt to norms and expectations of his wife's natal family – newlyweds tend to experience conflict between their roles as spouses, partners and lovers and their obligations before the extended family. Among 32 informants, only one newlywed couple lives matrilocally for around five years, which is most of their marriage. In Kazakhstan, it is relatively infrequent to encounter newlyweds who co-reside matrilocally, primarily due to the strong cultural norms that favor patrilocality. Matrilocal residence often occurs in circumstances, when the wife's family has greater economic resources, or there are practical considerations like proximity to employment or better living conditions.

While Aliya from Almaty suggested that their experience of matrilocal co-residence was positive, she emphasized limited privacy as Aliya and her husband 'act as if they are still children before her parents' and 'act as married adults only within the confines of their room' – a display of affection before elders is considered inappropriate. Newlyweds are expected to conform to the established norms of a parental household – as co-residence is accompanied by the expectations of respect and subordination, thereby affecting coupledom's sense of adulthood (Turaeva 2017). In Kazakh families, hierarchy plays a significant role in structuring relationships and determining the distribution of authority – this hierarchy is reinforced by the cultural value placed on age and gender, with elders, particularly men, being given the most respect and decision-making power. Within the 'female sphere', there is also a clear hierarchy, with senior female family members, be it the mother-in-law or bride's own mother, imposing considerable influence over younger women (Edgar 2004, 95; Laruelle 2017, 54).

Aliya acknowledged that there is a social stigma around matrilocal co-residence, especially in cultures where patrilocal co-residence is the norm. Stigmatizing matrilocal arrangements leads to social pressures and invokes husband's inability to provide for a family. However, their coupledom's social standing is not affected by such criticisms because of understanding

and conscious social circle. Aliya's willingness to move out derives not from social pressures but from discomfort that she experiences in her natal home. Based on Aliya's narratives, it is her who expresses a desire to move out, despite her husband's contentment with the current arrangement.

> *I am already tired of living with my parents. I want to live separately, but my husband is comfortable here. Besides, we often have conflicts in the kitchen with my mother. It feels like she still sees me as a child, not an adult woman. I feel like a kelin in my own home. I must obey my mother and follow her rules.* (Aliya)

Aliya reflected on conflicts with her mother, especially in the kitchen and referred to it as '*pritirka*' in Russian (a period of accommodation) that lasted for an extended period until all family members accommodated to their living circumstance. Interestingly, Aliya noted that she feels as if she is *kelin* in her natal home, to the contrary, she feels more comfortable and like a 'daughter' when visiting her husband's parents'. Upon marriage, a woman might experience control and restrictions not only while living with her husband's parents but also within her natal home and she might be offered support and care while co-residing patrilocally or visiting husband's parents occasionally, without building a sense of interdependence that derives from sharing home and table. This highlights the complexity of kinship dynamics, where power and authority are influenced by personal relationships and the behaviors of individual family members, making family experiences context-dependent and multifaceted. She shared that: 'When we visit my husband's parents, I feel like a daughter. They accept me with love and don't make as many demands'. Furthermore, her narratives indicate that newlyweds end up co-residing with either sets of parents primarily due to economic benefits such as shared expenses and pooled resources, and secondarily due to traditional expectations that emphasize family unity. For Aliya, the reasoning behind co-residence was twofold: economic benefits and a

convenience of location: '*We decided to live with my parents because it would help us save money on rent and other expenses*'.

Cohabitation with parents allows newlyweds to mitigate financial pressures, while adhering to traditional expectations. The period of co-residence is strategically utilized to save money and accumulate enough funds to afford their own apartment, co-residence with parents reinforces this practice, making it a culturally accepted solution to the financial challenges faced by newlyweds in Central Asian urban middle-class societies. Out of the 32 informants, only Erkezhan from Astana stated that their patrilocal co-residence is driven by a cultural rule that her husband, being the only son, stays with his parents. This tradition is rooted in the responsibility of the son to care for his aging parents and continue the family lineage. Although tradition dictates that the only son remains with his parents to provide support, in practice, Erkezhan and her husband are the ones who benefit from the financial support and care of the parents, who typically have a greater financial capacity. In their case, older generation plays a crucial role in ensuring the success of the young couple, particularly in the early years of marriage. Other informants too, including Aliya, shared how cooperation and support from parents and relatives plays an instrumental role in helping a newlywed couple to accommodate to family life. Interestingly, depending on both the quality of newlyweds' relationships with their parents and their parents' capacity to offer assistance, newlyweds are inclined to determine the sources of support they will seek and make decisions regarding co-residence accordingly. Aliya reflected that: '*My husband's parents live three hours away from the city center, in Taldyqorgan to be more specific, making the commute to work very inconvenient*'. Their decision to co-reside matrilocally was influenced by practical considerations. Aliya's parents' house is large, with several floors, and situated in Almaty, where both she and her husband work. In contrast, her husband's parents live three hours away from the cosmopolitan city center, making her parents' home a more practical and economical choice. These factors

collectively made her parents' home the more logical and economical choice for their residence.

Matrilocal residence is said to be associated with greater social support from their natal families and help to retain stronger support networks, which can enhance women's autonomy within the household, they rarely address its challenges (Gruijters and Ermisch 2018). Aliya's case showcases how, despite advantages, she must navigate complex family dynamics and potential conflicts. The proximity to one's own family can sometimes blur the lines between marital and familial roles, leading to tensions. Women may find themselves mediating between their spouse and their natal family, balancing the expectations and needs of both sides. Additionally, particularly co-residence, can sometimes limit a woman's autonomy as she may still be the subject to the authority and judgement of her parents. While living arrangements come with both advantages and disadvantages, they also present challenges that require careful navigation of familial relations. It highlights that family and marriage practices are shaped not only by practical considerations but also by the emotional and rational dimensions that influence individual decisions and interpersonal interactions. In the following section, I explore how these realms intersect with cultural practices, demonstrating that marriage and family life in Kazakhstan involve a complex interplay between both affective bonds and strategic choices. Just as matrilocal arrangement offers specific advantages and challenges, patrilocal co-residence presents its own set of dynamics. Unlike matrilocal co-residence, patrilocal cohabitation often requires women to adapt to the household of their husband's family, navigating different expectations and power structures.

4.8. *Reinventing Traditions*

A rational choice model posits that residence patterns will not usually satisfy the traditional norms and expectations, as they are 'adaptive to family needs and responsive to specific socioeconomic conditions' (Chan 2017, 129). It seems that even though

patrilocality is the default post-marital residence setup, urban newlyweds tend to be flexible in their residence preferences and employ adaptive strategies that may sometimes resist patrilocal traditional framework. This resistance to traditional residence patterns is well documented in research that takes a life course approach that 'views family change as adaptations that individuals and family members make to fit the changed environments' (Chan 2017, 129). A decision to resettle or stay may depend on the specificities of parent-newlyweds relationship, these factors include: 'affection, social contact, consensus, functional change, filial norms, and geographic proximity' (Bergtosn and Roberts 1991).

In traditional family system in the Central and South Asia, as well as in Caucasus, women are expected to co-reside or live in an immediate vicinity to groom's kin. According to literature, 'patrilocality fosters lifelong bonds and supports relationships between parents and sons, reinforcing the dominance of male kin over female kinship ties' (Greenhalgh 1985; Whyte 2003 in Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 1). According to literature, 'patrilocality fosters lifelong bonds and supports relationships between parents and sons, reinforcing the dominance of male kin over female kinship ties' (Greenhalgh 1985; Whyte 2003 in Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 1). The reasons why newlyweds may resettle differ from couple to couple, yet it seems universal that patrilocal co-residence is associated with unnecessary annoyance and inconveniences that are negated through physical distance from groom's parents. Patrilocality is also associated with son preference as it may also put women at both social and economic disadvantage. Likewise, patrilocal living arrangement invokes pressures to conform to traditional roles, and women may experience pressures to conform to expectations of extended family. The nuances of individual experiences also disclose how physical distance may not always downgrade the 'patrilineal' intervention. Firstly, a groom and his parents may have developed a relationship that presupposes daily communication, reliance on each other's assistance, that gives relatives additional leverages to intervene.

This is not to say that patrilocality is always associated control, inconveniences, and conflict. This living arrangement outbalances the other types of residential patterns which 'reflect the common global pattern of patriarchy', yet with more women joining the labor force – the more egalitarian families get (Macionis 2017, 488).

Matrilocality can too be associated with daughters' heightened support of her parents, in terms of both practical and emotional needs. Counter to traditional expectations, 'daughters often provide higher levels of practical, financial and social support to parents than sons…' (Lei 2013; Gruijters 2017). Either parents or relatives may perform as competitors, rather than cooperators, which may propel newlyweds to rethink their residence arrangements. Therefore, it is not always the rules of patrilineality or a residence pattern, but the intricacies of individual relationships and personalities involved that shape the strategies of 'doing' family. Matrilocality and neolocality - depending on the concerned party's support needs, sibling structure, economic standing, and the level of education – may have lasting effects on how coupledom resolves their personal daily issues or plan their future. Likewise, while remaining patrilineal, some newlyweds may end up in a 'place of the mother'– matrilocally, or bilocally, whilst others favor neolocality – 'a residential pattern in which a married couple lives apart from both sets of parents' (Macionis 2017, 488). Findings, that derive from the interviews with women suggest that while newlyweds tend to comply with a norm to co-reside with groom's parents for the first one or two years, later they tend to mitigate this norm by advancing their willingness to move out – this intention is usually conveyed by women first, and with husbands' consent, a change in residence pattern is accomplished. Although, when newlyweds do not seem to agree on moving out, women employ more vigorous strategies of persuasion by performing purposeful and strategic agency that varies from delivering ultimatum or suggesting divorce.

By all means, there is more to marriage and marital customs than meets the ideological premises or conventional expectations of the elementary kinship relations, regulations around sexual behavior and reproduction, child rearing and moral obligations. Besides scholarly debates, definitions and terminologies around kinship, family, and marriage has long been shaped by Soviet legacy. There is much written about Central Asian 'kirghiz-kaisak' women or 'inorodcy' (non-natives), and the 'knowledge' was produced by male Russian speaking ethnographers.

4.9. *Chapter Summary*

This chapter emphasizes women's narratives and highlights the complexities of doing marriage and family life in the context of volatile relational dynamics and individual agency. Using the concept of *bricolage*, it captures how Kazakh urban women navigate traditional norms while asserting their interests. The chapter opens with Aidana's story, a middle-class woman from Astana who co-resides patrilocally – her experiences exemplify how patrilocal arrangement offers both the restrictions and leverages to perform agency. Likewise, by means of performing emotional labor, Aidana strategically manages her relations with parents-in-law, balancing her role as a wife and *kelin*, while also asserting her educational and career aspirations. This story, like many others, does not serve to withstand cliched rhetoric on submissive daughters-in-law, but to uncover habitual family practices of urban middle-class Kazakh women. Individual narratives of women who reflect on their marital experiences considering their residence arrangements, nonetheless, illustrate the impact of distance on marital agency. Gulnaz, by living separately from both sets of parents establish an independent household – her proactive approach to neolocality reflects a pattern among urban newlyweds who strategically balance autonomy with family support and kinship obligations. This chapter also explores matrilocal and bilocal living arrangements. For instance, Aliya's matrilocal co-residence challenges the default patrilocal expectations, which highlights the variability of

family practices. The chapter concludes by situating these women's narratives within broader discussions on kinship, family, and marriage in Central Asia.

5. Chapter V. Reflections on Marriage, Kinship, and Residence

5.1. *Introduction*

This chapter focuses primarily on my personal experience as a newlywed, employing an autoethnographic approach to explore the complex dynamics of marriage, residence patterns, kinship relations, and women's agency. By reflecting on my journey, I am to shed light on how my decisions, relationships, and living arrangements have shaped, and been shaped by, the cultural and social norms surrounding marriage in Kazakhstan. While I integrate the narratives of other women, the core of this chapter revolves around my experiences. Thorough this exploration, I examine the emotional, relational, and practical challenges I faced in navigating different residence patterns – from a matrilocal nearby arrangement to a 'living apart together' (LAT) situation – and how these have impacted both my sense of agency and my relationships with family members. This chapter is an introspective narrative of how I, as a Kazakh married woman embedded within specific cultural expectations, negotiated my role as a wife and daughter, and how this negotiation reflects tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary urban Kazakhstan.

5.2. *Translating Data from Personal Experiences*

To enable both participants and readers get a grasp of my individual sensemaking 'from an iterative process of experiencing, collecting, and analyzing data from the fieldwork' and interviews, I need to recount my marital experiences and arrangements (Weick 1995, 5). I opted to share the quandaries of my marital life unvarnished, throughout this research, not because I was longing for a sense of acceptance, nor did I share in conformity with tradition, expectations or other women's narratives and reasoning. First, my narratives were used to ensure reciprocity with the research participants during interviews. Second, my experiences are fundamental in understanding other women's storylines and ways of describing their experiences, as it helps to notice recurring emotions, feelings, interpretations, and patterns. As interviews proceeded,

my understanding of human dialogic interactions and conversational engagement eulogized the significance of the concept of vulnerability.

It is not infrequent that the question 'how is your marital life going?' is tackled by pulling on a mask of invulnerability to seem proper. The reply is usually somewhere between 'it is ok' and 'everything is right, thank you' - especially when it comes to the instances of small talk among acquaintances, not to speak of concerns of a stranger-researcher. Yet to bring down this 'rearguard' or resistance, someone must be courageous enough to speak from a position of vulnerability and make 'a real humanly experience' visible, at least through orally performing and narrating about what has once happened. The acts of reciprocal sharing and reflecting are instrumental in building a relationship that allows for vulnerability that uncovers multiple layers of human emotional, social, and cultural praxis. Therefore, to craft a compelling narrative about women's agency in marriage, I had to facilitate conversational engagement with participants by digging into my personal life.

While reflecting on personal life during dialogic interactions may be uncomfortable, systematizing it on paper is an intricate process. Writing is a distressing endeavor, especially when it comes to something as intimate as marriage, your own failures, and a romantic eagerness to reconcile 'for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part' with rationality of choice. Marriage starts long before a wedding day, it starts with affection, promises and arrangements, and encouragement coupled with excitement of relatives who, somehow, believe that the struggles of life would bypass these lovebirds – at least, this was my personal story.

What is more important, marriage is rarely only about the interplay between the two, or within a nuclear family – it usually involves parents, relatives, and friends. Therefore, a wedding-planning checklist incorporates a series of traditional practices such as *kuda tusu* (matchmaking), *syrga salu* (putting on earrings on a bride) and *uzatu toi* (giving a girl in

marriage celebration), that facilitate acquaintance of relatives from groom's and bride's sides. I was the one who denied the significance of these festive-traditional activities, as I found them expensive and irrelevant, yet recalling them from where I am at today gives me a sense of peace and fulfillment. Interestingly, only three out of 32 women reflected upon their wedding planning and arrangements in length and details. Ayala at that moment was married for only 1 month, Lyazzat for 2 months and Leila for 7 months. Although I did not explicitly inquire about wedding planning and ceremonies, it became apparent that women tend to reflect more deeply on major and transformative events, with recent experiences often being more vividly recounted. This observation suggests that women selectively choose which experience to narrate based on the perceived significance or value of the occurrence.

While my wedding planning took place more than two years ago, I still tend to come back to this memory frequently. Two years ago, my parents made sure that my *uzatu toi*, which is bride's farewell ceremony, attested both a meaningful agreement between the families and my initiation into womanhood. The bride's farewell ceremony ensures continuity of tradition that facilitates social assent between bride's and groom's families, yet this practice is not compulsory, and it is up to situational arrangements if *uzaty toi* would be held or not. For my parents, *uzaty toi* was of immense importance because I am their only child, and this event was creatively adapted to this specific context. My *uzaty toi* practically re-examined some elements of tradition by departing from the rhetoric of a daughter fleeing home to a rhetoric of respective households that acquire a daughter and a son – meaning that my parents do not 'give' me into the groom's family but acquire a son in the face of my husband. The speeches given by my parents during this festive event are great examples of cultural bricolage and meaning-making that reinvents tradition by reconciling 'the old', or giving a girl into groom's family, and 'the new', or merging the families together – 'exchanging' a daughter for a son and vice versa. As

I recount, my parents reiterated how proud they were to finally introduce a son into their family, and that our families simply got bigger.

Currently, my parents have distanced themselves from my husband, effectively excluding him from their family circle, as they believe that our union is no longer appropriate or beneficial. Despite my willingness to work on marriage, their disapproval has significantly influenced our situation. They have insisted on divorce, viewing it as the necessary next step, yet this decision has been postponed due to my current focus on completing my PhD, which they consider of primary importance. It seems that post-marital residence is an imperfect indicator of why I have a limited control over whether my husband is included or excluded from the family, yet it explains how it happened. Matrilocal nearby residence, in my case, had an indirect impact on the deterioration of relationship between my parents and my husband. What is more important, this context is replete with the feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, a sense of failure and shame – yet it was fundamental for developing my personal differential agency through a together-apart living arrangement. Within the preference and constraints paradigm, our LAT living arrangement is indicative of 'practical and emotional anxieties over co-residence' governed by reluctance to handle parental surveillance and disapproval (Duncan and Carter 2018, 151).

Since I devote much of my attention towards self-reflexivity, I find it unreasonable to blame anyone but myself for the current state of events. What is more important, my personal experience was foundational for compiling the list of interview questions and investigating if there is a relationship between a number of children in a family and the degree of parental interference. Thus, I asked if participants and their husbands have siblings, as sibling structure can be associated with the degree to which parents may interfere by offering unsolicited advice or exert control over newlyweds' decision-making. There is more than meets the eye when it comes to the implicit connection between sibling structure, gender composition and the degree

of parental interference or the intensity of intergenerational ties. Daughters are not expected to satisfy parents' support needs or to co-reside with them, yet 'sonless parents have no normative option for social support and exchange and are thus more likely to rely on daughters' – sonless parents tend to encourage bilocal and matrilocal living arrangements, 'even though the latter arrangement is often considered embarrassing for the husband' (Pimentel and Liu 2004 in Gruijters and Ermisch 2018, 6). It is important to note that parental interreference into newlyweds' decision-makings is not an issue to every coupledom – during storytelling, some women did not pay much attention to a relationship between their couple and parents or relatives. Furthermore, informants' narratives suggest that the sibling structure may not affect the degree to which parents could interfere, on contrary, the support needs, specificities of personal relationship and history, personalities involved have a more notional impact. Only one informant Erkezhan from Astana mentioned that their patrilocal co-residence derives from the fact that her husband is the only son, and he is expected to remain in his paternal household.

Below, I will go over the ways in which circumstantial matrilocal living arrangement, my strategies of 'doing' family for the first year resulted in deterioration of relationships between my husband and my parents, and his parents and my parents. Furthermore, I will elaborate on my 'together-apart' or LAT living arrangement that I did not find among other 32 participants, it seems that both Aliya's matrilocal co-residence and my LAT matrilocal nearby residence are the most uncommon forms of living arrangements. Yet firstly, I will start by introducing the context and my marital dynamics - as I find it important in understanding my decision-making and expectations from the marriage.

5.3. *My Decision to Marry*

My husband and I, both originally from Eastern Kazakhstan, spent our childhoods playing together in the city of Ust-Kamenogorsk, and even shared a classroom in the second grade. This shared history gave us a strong sense of confidence that our families would easily connect

and support our union. Our marriage was, in many ways, a reunion of our families, both of whom share the same tribal affiliation *the naimans* from Ust-Kamenogorsk and surrounding villages. This common background fostered a sense of familiarity and connection between our families, smoothing the integration process and making our union seem natural and harmonious. We believed that the alignment in our families' customs and values would help minimize potential conflicts and foster a stronger sense of unity from the outset of our marriage. I elaborate on this point because several informants reflected on the significant differences between their families and those of their spouses.

These differences, whether in terms of cultural practices or social expectations, often create challenges in the early stages of marriage. Women shared that when families had divergent traditions or approaches to family roles, it sometimes led to misunderstandings or conflicts, particularly for the *kelin* who was expected to adapt to her husband's family's way of life. For instance, Madina highlighted how her family from Eastern Kazakhstan, known for more egalitarian values, found it challenging to integrate with her husband's family from Southern Kazakhstan, a region known for its conservative and traditional practices. This regional divide often led to tensions and misunderstandings, particularly for the *kelin*, who was expected to conform to her husband's family's way of live, even when it conflicted with Madina's upbringing and personal values. The regional divide in Dina's narratives becomes apparent through the differing expectations and practices between her family and her husband's family. Her husband Beka was born in Shymkent, Southern Kazakhstan, but has lived in Almaty since he was seven years old, while Dina has lived in Almaty her entire life. The regional divide particularly comes into play with the expectations of family cohabitation. Dina's husband's parents, originally from Kyzylorda, Southern Kazakhstan, expected them to live together as a family unit, reflecting a more traditional, patrilocal expectation common in certain regions of Kazakhstan. In contrast, Dina, influenced by her parents' perspectives and her upbringing in

Almaty, insisted on living independently, which highlights a more modern and individualistic approach.

For my parents, it was essential to marry their only daughter to someone from a similar background, as they have usually said that I should stay away from men who were born in Southern or Western Kazakhstan. This rhetoric slipped in narratives of other women as well, as the divisions between Kazakhs from different regions subsist and manifest themselves markedly in validating or refuting certain unions. These discursive patterns and interpretative repertoires are not surprising, given that cosmopolitan centers like Astana and Almaty, while offering numerous opportunities, also attract people from all over Kazakhstan, bringing together individuals from diverse regional backgrounds. The influx of people from various parts of the country means that these cities are melting pots of different cultural practices, values, and social norms. For instance, Kazakhs from the southern regions are known for adhering to traditional practices, particularly in relation to family roles and marriage customs, while those from the eastern regions may have slightly different customs, shaped by historical interactions and geographical factors. This diversity in practices can lead to varying expectations and interpretations of family life among newlyweds, making the process of integration and mutual understanding more complex (Olcott 1995, 47).

My parents' discretion derives from the idea that traditional and conservative mindset that is prevalent on the South and West is not something that contributes to marital happiness, Eastern Kazakhs are said to be more cosmopolitan and egalitarian when it comes to the power dynamics between husband and wife. My father tends to say that he did not raise me to grow into someone's wife or *kelin*, he raised me to become educated and independent, to have my own apartment, and never obey but partner. Making sure that me and my husband do not share

bloodline according to the *zhety ata*[20] rule was only reinforcing certainty in this union, not only between us, but also among our parents and relatives.

Kazakhs from Ust-Kamenogorsk, Eastern Kazakhstan, are mostly *naimans* who tend to be russified *(obrusevshyi)*, drink vodka during feasts and sometimes indulge in eating bacon. Kazakhs from Ust-Kamenogorsk, probably due to the fact that this city is only 130 km away from Kazakh-Russian border, tend to be forebearing when it comes to *kelin*-related duties. Women do not wear headscarf and are not obliged to do so, as they also freely sit at the head of the table (*torde*) and argue with men, if find necessary– something that is not that frequent, or at least not that manifestly observable in the Southernmost parts of Kazakhstan. Overall, it seems that Eastern Kazakhs only occasionally, or even ceremoniously and formally, refer to Kazakh traditional certainties when pondering over everyday decision-makings. When it comes to my *kelin*-responsibilities, I did not have to perform *kelin-shai* or pour tea the next morning after the wedding, I did not have to cook as my husband preferred cooking himself, I did not have to do *salem salu* or bowing before his parents. The only expectations were to visit his parents occasionally and 'just be happy on your own' – as his parents tend to regularly reiterate. This reality was well anticipated on my behalf, as I knew how family relations are managed in the East, with slight variations among different familial systems, I would guess.

One of the proudest and fortunate moments that come to my mind when recalling my marriage is the relationship with my mother-in-law. Growing up I noticed how tense the relations between my mother and her mother-in-law were, and this dynamic is not infrequent and is usually ridiculed in media and popular discourse – I was prepared to find myself in similar circumstances. Nonetheless, my husband's mother either because of her age, personal background, or incomprehensible unearthly wisdom welcomed me into the family as if I am

[20] The *Zhety Ata* rule is a traditional Kazakh custom that plays a crucial role in regulating marriage and kinship relations within Kazakh society. It translates from Kazakh language as 'seven ancestors', and the rule upholds that Kazakhs must not marry someone within their own clan for seven generations, or until their lineage has diverged from a common ancestor for at least seven generations (Olcott 1995; Bissenova 2012, 2012; Flynn 2021)

her own daughter. Arguably, the distance between us and my husbands' parents might have facilitated a positive relationship, as they were not invested in our decision-makings, disagreements, or strategizing – communication was limited to visits once in 3-6 months, and occasional online correspondence.

According to the informants, it is only through co-residence that the true nature of individuals is fully revealed, as this living arrangement necessitates constant and close daily interaction. Co-residence goes beyond the surface-level interactions that typically occur before marriage, bringing to light the complexities of each person's character, habits, and behavioral patterns. This close proximity, while fostering deeper relationships, also amplifies any existing tensions or differences, making it clear who each family member truly is in the context of everyday life. When it comes to my relationship with my mother-in-law, during tea-time we oftentimes discussed marriage and womanhood, and she usually reminded me that she is on my side in case her son 'fails' – while this is pleasant to hear, later, it turned out that she meant it in practice. I have also noticed how it is indeed mothers of the family who manage the family dynamics or even arrange traditional festivities; likewise, it was our mothers who called up each other, designated the dates and regulations around pre-nuptials, while fathers agreed and followed up. This dynamic is also seen in narratives of other women, where it is mothers who tend to consult, help, assist or interfere; fathers-in-law rarely occupy a pivotal role in bride's storylines.

5.4. *Matrilocal Residence and LAT*

I found myself spinning within a loop of putting up with the hardships that our first married year has offered, as they[21] tend to tell that a 'period of accommodation' or *pritirka* would certainly end. When our disagreements flee the confines of our apartment, different opinions

[21] Relatives and friends often remark during marriage festivities – and continue to do so afterwards – that the first years of marriage are the most challenging but reassure that things will improve with time. This sentiment is a common rhetorical move, serving both as a source of comfort and as a gentle acknowledgement of the inevitable difficulties that newlyweds face.

have manifested themselves in commentaries, suggestions and even sanctions. This is where our circumstantial matrilocal living arrangement played into the relationship dynamics between me and my parents, me and my husband, my parents and my husband, and between my parents and his. A close physical proximity to my parents, coupled with their reluctance to separate their family from my own family, and my personal inability to maintain distance resulted in the current living arrangement, where me and my husband live 'together-apart'. This sequence of events is instrumental in understanding why me and my husband, while being married, today live 'together-apart' – I had to move to my parents first, then all by myself, while he resides in his own apartment.

While my experience confirms that newlyweds tend to shift in their residence patterns, and sometimes it is conflict between a young couple and parents that facilitate newlyweds' moving out, among other 32 participants, our couple is the only one that lives in a together-apart, matrilocal nearby living arrangement. Living together apart, or a LAT relationship, is regarded as a new family form, where a couple stays together but prefers not to share 'bed and table' (Levin 2004, 223). LAT is generally unrecognized both socially and academically, yet 'LAT is sometimes cited as the next stage, after cohabitation, in the development of an individualized post familial family and of do-it-yourself life history' (Duncan and Carter 2018, 138). Both my husband's and my parents are aware of our living arrangement yet have different opinions. My parents think that it will give me time to accommodate and slide into divorce smoothly, while his parents give us time and space to decide if we are able to work things through and move-in together eventually. All in all, similar to cohabitation, our circumstance is representative of how unconventional family forms get to be introduced and how norms change under different internal and external influences. Furthermore, it seems obvious that LAT relationships are possible when bride and groom own their personal apartments or have a capacity to rent – a privilege that allows for creating a distance between individuals, for creating

'the space' of privacy and security. This privilege derives from the fact that both me and my husband were given our own apartments by our parents, and this is where we can accommodate without a necessity to live together while issues are unresolved. Among women's narratives, property ownership or a financial capacity to move-out, by herself or with a husband, plays an instrumental part in determining whether relationship with in-laws or between newlyweds themselves would fracture or remain stable. Furthermore, before I moved in into my apartment, I needed to cover the repair bills and prepare to live solo – meanwhile I lived with my parents. On the one hand, returning to your natal home is shameful as it signifies failure in managing marriage and adult life. On the other hand, it allows parents to take more control over their own child and amplify disappointment. Therefore, the consequent LAT arrangement has number of benefits such as privacy and autonomy.

For our relatives and even most of our friends and acquaintances, our current LAT arrangement remains invisible as we do not share eagerness to explain why and how it happened. Just like matrilocal co-residence is unusual, LAT relationship is not integrated in everyday speech – it is almost unrealistic to find spouses who share their experience of *cohabitation alternée* or 'cohabitation where the couple alternates between their two dwellings' (Levin 2004, 227). The only LAT relationship that I know of is the arrangement between my aunt and her husband. Initially, they co-resided with the groom's parents, yet when the relationship between bride and her father-in-law deteriorated, my aunt had to move out. This arrangement allowed them to keep and maintain their marriage, and it was possible because prior to marriage, my aunt invested in her own apartment. Below in Table 4, I want to schematically present how our living arrangements changed in 2 years of marriage:

Table 4. Residence Patterns Dynamic

Newlywed Couple	Current Residence Pattern	Previous Residence Pattern
Alina	Matrilocal, LAT	Matrilocal, nearby residence

Relatively little is known about LAT relationships in Kazakhstan, yet I can reflect upon my personal experience. Within Levin's (2004, 229) qualitative study of LAT spouses, depending on the patterns that he has found, the interviewees were divided into two groups. First group is comprised of those who would like to live together yet due to 'one reason or another have decided not to do so'. Second group includes those who 'would not live together even if they could, and who want to remain a couple living together apart' (Levin 2004, 230). It seems that we belong to the first group, but our situation differs from patterns and contexts described in the Levin's (2004) study.

I used our matrilocal nearby residence as an excuse to spend more time at my natal house, to avoid adjusting to my new role as a wife by escaping, and over-sharing with my mother. Matrilocal nearby residence, without me delving into research, revealed itself as an arrangement that provides emotional and practical support, that aids in getting used to now being both my parents' daughter and my husband's wife. It also felt as if matrilocal nearby residence balances out the rhetoric of a girl 'fleeing home' to join husband's family to continue his bloodline – it ensured that I remain close to my natal kin. Due to close proximity to my parents, me and my husband used to visit them often, spend holidays together, which reinforced conversance and facilitated my husband's introduction to my natal kin. In turn, his parents lived in Ust-Kamenogorsk, which is more than 1000 km away from Astana, and they had a very limited access to our everyday lives, strategies, disagreements, and planning. Given that my parents lived close, and I had a tendency to overshare - access to my marriage that can be measured in time, information, emotional investment was granted to my natal kin.

While nearby residence is associated with increased support, it can also lead to an increased involvement. Likewise, my over-sharing with my mother triggered challenges that include disturbed privacy, intervention in marital decision-making, pressures to conform to the family dynamic that is peculiar to my parental household. Failing in boundary-setting on my behalf

gradually pushed me out of the unitary family system that we were meant to build privately with my husband. What is more important, it granted my parents an access to my marriage and leverages to take control over it, to eventually pressure for divorce. Several scholars have explored matrilocal living arrangement and their impact on women's lives, particularly in terms of support and agency. Caroline Brettell (1986) work in Portuguese communities has explored how matrilocal residence can provide women with a strong support network. Janet Carsten's (1997) work on kinship, particularly in Southeast Asia, has also touched on the significance of matrilocality in providing women with emotional well-being. According to scholarship, maternal kin is associated with a greater support than affinal kin. While my parents performed as competitors, affinal kin or my husband's parents, on contrary, were cooperators who, through direct and indirect means, attempted to support us without criticism and judgement. Both me and my husband are the only children in our respective families, from resembling backgrounds with similar financial or economic standing. The only meaningful difference was the distance between us and respective parents, their personalities, and probably a propensity to overshare.

5.5. *Developing Differential Agency in LAT*

In a sense, the current living arrangement of 'together-apart' allows me to continue working on my research about married women, while remaining married myself, without the necessity to withstand the pressures from both my parents and my husband. Through delving into our current LAT arrangement, I got to operationalize my personal agency that is relational with my parents. It may seem as a strategic and a purposeful agency, but it is oftentimes reduced to patience and lowliness. While I value freedom and liberty, my performances of agency tend to be emotional and responsive to external constraints - it is a negative preference rather than a strategic choice. In other words, my agency is constrained and bound by my parents' perceived unsuitability of my husband.

This living arrangement was suggested by myself, and without obtaining neither my parents' nor my husband's consent, it became today's reality. One the one hand, living 'together-apart' is a purposeful and strategic choice on my behalf as it gives me the space from which I can further my interests. Firstly, while I failed in maintaining a conventional marriage, I am not willing to give up on my 'wife mode'. Secondly, as I am economically independent from both my parents and my husband, I can allow myself to enjoy a sense of freedom and security within my apartment – it makes me less vulnerable and secures me from emotional threats of not being able to share 'bed and table' with my husband again. Thirdly, it creates a distance between my parents and myself so that I can make my own choices freely, without their interventions. Lastly, while I am still married, I do not have to perform as a wife daily – this gives me an opportunity to focus on my self-projects such as earning a living, doing sports, and finalizing my thesis. While LAT arrangement may seem as a perfectly great example of developing and performing a strategic agency, in fact, it is more complicated and nuanced. This arrangement resulted from external constraints and inability to assert cohabitation – while space and freedom are valuable, a more traditional family form is preferable.

I prefer LAT arrangement because it meets my objectives, yet my objectives are the result of circumstantial constraints established by my parents, and my subjective perceptions of those constraints. Therefore, LAT is not the result of only my purposive action, and a capacity for agency is not only a matter of choice. Today's living arrangement is the outcome of the interplay of numerous factors including the ways in which my parents shared their resources so that I have my own apartment. While LAT appears as the 'choice', in fact, it is rather a negative preference. Ideally, both me and my partner would have preferred cohabitation. Nonetheless, cohabitation seems impossible for now because of setbacks in the past experiences of cohabitation coupled with my parents' perceived unsuitability of my husband – these can be 'generalized as a more diffuse anxiety' (Duncan and Carter 2018, 151).

Likewise, LAT arrangement is indicative of a different side of agency – 'it is feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, rather than strategic plans or choices, that provide an agentic force' (Duncan and Carter 2018, 151). Agency, in given circumstances, is practical but reactive and relational to the outside pressures introduced by more powerful agents – my parents. LAT offers a sense of freedom and is indeed an alternative family form, yet it does not satisfy our coupledom's needs and objectives perfectly, so this arrangement is only a temporary solution. Besides having a responsive agency, I needed to develop agency through patience to overcome the hardships of not being approved and accepted by my parents. Our living arrangement does not downplay commitment and relationality within our coupledom, yet it decreases external pressures and expectations that come from either sets of parents. Likewise, LAT combines both continuity and change by allowing me to 'act strategically but in response to perceived threats' and 'put my interests first but in relation to my partner' (Duncan and Carter 2018, 140). Nonetheless, it is crucial to be upright about how LAT came into being – we ended up living apart and it was a negative preference, rather than a positive choice.

5.6. *Reinventing Marriage*

It can be argued that parents who have daughters tend to be more protective, especially given the local patriarchal context that regulates power dynamics and gender role attitudes. However, from my personal experience, it seems that it is matrilocal nearby residence that, at some point, did not allow me and my husband to restore our relationship. Given that I do not have my parents' blessing, which is arguably an important traditional artefact that still has practical significance, I cannot move in with my husband. In a sense, it signifies that LAT arrangement is not merely my individualistic whim, but a desire to reconcile staying married and not displeasing my parents. While it may seem ridiculous, parents' strong and persuasive utterances such as 'we do not need your children, if you would have them with him' and 'where

are the divorce papers?' – have a disheartening effect on an individual who grew up with an understanding that family is above else, and it is valuable to protect and save it.

Although my husband is the only son, and in many women's narratives this would suggest that newlyweds are expected to live with his parents or eventually co-reside patrilocally, this living arrangement was never an option in our case. First, it did not align with either my or my husband's personal expectations for our marriage. Second, my husband's parents do not support the idea of co-residence, as they value their independence and believe that newlyweds should establish their own households and live separately as adults. Furthermore, my husband's parents prefer living in Ust-Kamenogorsk and have no plans to relocate to Astana, while for us, the city of Ust-Kamenogorsk does not offer sufficient job opportunities compared to the prospects available in Astana. This geographical distance adds another layer to the dynamics of our relationship. My mother-in-law once mentioned that, traditionally in Kazakh culture, it is expected that she would spend time teaching me how to cook, manage the household, and fulfill the expected duties of a *kelin*. However, due to the distance and my overwhelming commitments to my thesis and other responsibilities, this level of close contact has not been possible. Despite these challenges, my mother-in-law has been understanding and has adapted to these circumstances, accepting that she cannot require what is traditionally expected from a *kelin* given our current situation. Our case is indicative of broader transformations of family structures and *kelin* expectations in contemporary Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Werner (2009, 157) highlighted that traditional requirements of patrilocal residence patterns have begun to shift in urban areas due to modern employment demands, and migration patterns. Similarly, increasing urbanization and women's participation in higher education and the workforce have led to a renegotiation of traditional *kelin* roles – more families are now changing and adapting to more flexible and egalitarian arrangements (Peshkova 2014, 202-203).

The utility or gains that derive from commodities produced in my marriage are minimal, meaning that our marriage does not produce quality 'services' such as cleaning, feeding, sharing, and enhancing household income, or marital fulfillment and mutual development and support; it also does not 'produce' children, common projects, or even familial gatherings. When the costs of marriage outweigh gains, matrimony tends to gradually advance towards divorce. In economic and strategic viewpoints, marriage that does not multiply quantifiable commodities, and does not produce observable goods is not worth it. However, marriage is not as self-evident as it may seem, it also provides a sense of emotional care and companionship, sexual gratification, love, and mutual acceptance – these commodities are not quantified nor measured, yet they do play an integral part in maintaining marital relations. Compassionate love, care and emotional intimacy may not be instrumental behaviors or governing practices that prove a certain marriage to be worthwhile; it is expected that contractual obligations, order, traditional certainties, and expectations tend to prevail over affective and emotional ties. Nonetheless, people are not always logical and consistent, they do not calculate marriage as if it 'sits comfortably with the notion of choice', on contrary, marriage is expressed 'in the idiom of love' that 'has indeed become a prominent marker of the modern around the world' (Donner 2012, 2). Marriage does not repose on neutral facts and obligations, it changes and develops, it is responsive to the needs of actors – it can be based on affective ties and romantic love, it can draw from psychological dependency between husbands and wives, it can also 'defy parental guidance', it can persist because divorce is deemed shameful (Donner 2012, 7).

Within women's narratives, and in my story, it is oftentimes narrated how marriage turned out to be different than what was once expected. Some women spoke of how marriage taught them that seeing the world through 'rose-colored glasses' (*rozovye ochki*) is inefficient, how it is irrational to anticipate unequivocal understanding, and how marriage requires to be agile within a volatile environment of interpersonal relationships. While marriage is hard work that

does not always pay off straightway, these women remained married because of emotional attachment, eagerness to introduce new marital strategies, an ability to come up with alternative plans and scripts, a capacity to perform as lead agents who can offer support and care. Personal narratives tend to depict how individual actors shape their marital practices depending on their needs – these might not satisfy the expectations of parents or relatives. Coupledom might decide not to have children, while they are expected by their relatives, they might not share 'bed and table' yet remain emotionally connected. Within an institution of marriage, individual actors get to creatively innovate, discursively and practically challenge cultural and traditional certainties. To understand contemporary personal lives, it is crucial to notice and register how individual actors navigate through marriage through a 'bricolage of tradition and modernity', flexible pragmatism and new family forms (Carter and Duncan 2018, 137).

5.7. *Chapter Summary*

In this chapter, I delve into the complexities of marriage and residence patterns through an autoethnographic approach, focusing on my personal experience of being married. Through my personal narrative, I examine how proximity to one's natal family can influence marital decision-making and agency, illustrating how my LAT arrangement evolved as a response to external pressures, personal constraints, and familial involvement. My story showcases that women's agency and marital relations are not solely determined by living arrangements, as similar residence patterns do not guarantee identical outcomes. Women's narratives with the same residence patterns reveal that personal relationships, daily interactions, and the quality of kinship relations and dynamics significantly shape marital outcomes and women's agency in marriage. In my case, it becomes clear that the personalities of those involved and the nature of the relationships between kin play a crucial role in these dynamics. Not every woman in a matrilocal living arrangement receives consistent support or feels empowered; instead, the

interpersonal context and individual experiences heavily influence how agency is exercised within the marriage.

While traditionally, patrilocal residence is expected when a husband is the only son, my case showcases a departure from these norms, introducing new ways of 'doing family' in contemporary Kazakhstan. The chapter also addresses how geographical distance and professional commitments, such as my work on my PhD thesis, have impacted the dynamics of my relationship with my in-laws, particularly in the context of my role as a *kelin*. Traditionally, the mother-in-law would play an active role in teaching the *kelin* how to manage household duties and fulfill familial obligations. However, given the physical distance between us and my academic responsibilities, these expectations have been relaxed, indicating how contemporary Kazakh families adapt to changing circumstances. Furthermore, the chapter occasionally contrasts my personal experiences with other women's narratives, examining how similar living arrangements do not produce uniform outcomes. Other women's narratives indicate that patrilocal residence is rarely a direct result of a husband being the only son, nor is it solely driven by the necessity attributed to traditions. Instead, patrilocal co-residence often emerges as an economic and strategic choice, shaped by practical considerations such as financial stability or caregiving needs. The decisions about living arrangements are less about rigid adherence to cultural norms and more about addressing the immediate needs of the family. Furthermore, how women feel and act within these arrangements is unique to everyone. Women's experiences are oftentimes shaped by personal dynamics, emotional responses, and the specific context of their relationships.

6. Chapter VI. Family Practices.

6.1. *Introduction*

This chapter explores the intricate dynamics of marriage and family life, focusing on how newlywed couples navigate their residence patterns and its subsequent impact on marital relations and women's agency. As frequently stated, marriage is 'among the most important and momentous things in life' and it is hard work (Rollins 2017, 19). Often framed by discourses that dichotomize individualism and commitment, romance and pragmatism, marriage continues to be shaped by traditional and normative foundations. This chapter examines how these foundational elements interact with the lived experiences of newlywed women, revealing the ambivalence and complexity of their narratives concerning family, marriage, agency, and self-fulfillment. Furthermore, marriage and family are complex systems composed of multiple actors, each contributing to the dynamics of the household. The degree of interaction between those actors, along with the prevailing norms and expectations within the family, can significantly influence the evolution of the nuclear family structure among newlyweds. This may result in adaptation, reconfiguration of the roles, relationships and living arrangements. Thus, this chapter also reviews husband's responses to the same questions posed to women. By examining everyday interactions and the performative acts embedded within these narratives, this chapter uncovers how marriage and family, as complex systems, evolve and adapt in response to the degree of interaction among family members, as well as the norms and expectations governing these relationships.

6.2. *Synthesizing Women's Narratives*

To make sense of the variety of narratives, I compile a list of women's own definitions of agency to then identify its domains and indicators. Next, I explore similarities and differences in how women perform and 'do' marriage, depending on where they live. I analyze women's narratives by identifying key 'word clouds' derived from their interpretative repertoires and

discursive patterns. By examining the language they use, I aim to shed light on how these women perceive and perform their agency within the contexts of marriage and family. These word clouds reflect the recurring themes, concepts, and expressions that surface in their discussions – offering insights into how women navigate relational commitments, negotiate power dynamics, and balance tradition with personal autonomy. Accordingly, language becomes a tool for both articulating and performing agency in the everyday practices of marriage and kinship. The key categories and themes that I wanted to capture from the interviews are the following:

Key Themes in Pre-Marital Arrangements:

1. Structural factors: education, labor market participation, filial norms, and support needs
2. The motivation or rationale to get married
3. The expectations from marriage
4. Arrangements, responsibilities, and agreements

Key Themes In-Marriage:

1. Structural factors: education, labor market participation, availability of financial means and material assets, filial norms, and support needs – in dynamic
2. The rationale behind current living arrangement
3. Reflections on changing residence patterns, if applicable
4. Budgeting
5. Household management
6. Family planning, strategizing, leisure activities
7. Reflections on the interplay between living arrangements and women's agency
8. The satisfaction with marital life

Within wider social and emotional contexts, and narrative conventions, women's storytelling provides means of delving into individual lifetime and decision-making horizons;

provide intellectual space to identify either change or consistency at how women perform and adapt within different living arrangements. Narratives or data from the first person accumulate into themes and 'meaningful plots' and bring order to fragmented lived experiences; the process of constructing a narrative is one of the ways in which individuals make sense of themselves and others (Polginhore 1995). Benhabib (1992, 126) specifies it as *narrativity*, that translates agency as a narrative capacity, or 'the mode through which acts are identified' – the process that invents open-ended practices of agency pertaining to individual women. However, delving into the process of collective meaning-production through dialogic interactions with participants might interfere with social scientist's analytical stance, therefore it is vital to 'retain a degree of distance from narrative materials we collect, analyze and reproduce' (Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 169).

Narrative-based inquiry allows a narrator to reflect on experiences, and structural factors that shape or affect life course, and situate them within wider social settings – a process where 'human existence' is regarded as 'situated action' (Polginhorne 1995, 4-5). Narrative-based inquiry is inseparable from processes of storytelling and reflection, revision and retellings, testimonies, confessions, oral performance, memory, meanings, and identity. While narratives offer analytic opportunities, it is crucial to maintain that 'biographical materials' do not 'provide privileged means of access to informants' personal experiences, or their sources of self-identity' (Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 166). Thus, for the sake of not falling into celebratory sentiments or consider stories 'at face value', narratives need to be treated as 'accounts' and 'performances' that incorporate 'speech acts' and 'communicative actions' (Strawson 2004).

The value of an idiosyncratic style of narration is in its conformity to 'conventions of genre' and 'rhetorical, persuasive properties, and functions in constructing particular versions of events, justifications of actions, evaluations of other…' (Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 166-

167). Within a plurality of voices and life stories, every individual narrative re-creates realities 'they purport to describe' (Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 166-167). Amidst scholarly debates that challenge the utility of narratives and storytelling, I tend to gravitate towards recognizing the value of narrative agency and dialogic interactions. My normative claims derive from the idea that every individual 'I' has unique experiences and reflections from which a narrative is drawn – it is a process of one making sense of oneself, where individual is a 'unique site of meaning creation' (Lucas 2016, 21).

6.3. *Family Practices Across Homes: Bilocal Experience*

In her story, Dina from Almaty, who lives bilocally and has one son, argued that:

> *Rational women typically do not choose to enter marriage under given circumstances in Kazakhstan: patriarchy, traditions and 'Ctrl + V' (unification) with a groom's family*[22]. (Dina)

The informant's use of the term '*Ctrl + V*' draws an analogy between the computer command for 'copy and paste' and the expectation in Kazakhstan that a bride should seamlessly integrate into her husband's family. Dina explicated that only '*zhertvennica*' (victim) would choose to marry because 'a woman anyhow makes significant personal sacrifices'. Dina had to '*progibat'sya*' (to bend) and agreed to take part in *betashar* and 'bow 15 times to new relatives as a gesture of respect – I bowed my head 15 times, and I would never do it again' – she said. Even if this ceremony did not correspond with Dina's values, she nonetheless complied with it because it constituted 'doing family things' in her husband's family. Her narratives were not inflected with positive reflections on love and affection. However, she did not mention 'divorce' at once, and narrated about the ways in which she and her husband created their own order, where he is her 'helper' around household chores, while she is his 'helper' in childcare

[22] Dina referred to the norm of patrilineality. It is the system in which lineage, inheritance is traced through the male line. This practice influences various social structures and family practices in Kazakhstan, and other patriarchal societies – it shapes gender dynamics and expectations (Kudaibergenova 2016).

– this order is not what groom's parents would have desired, yet it works within their nuclear family and results in overall satisfaction within marriage. Furthermore, this order was easily maintained because newlyweds live separately in their own apartment. Dina emphasized that over three years of marriage, she managed to assert influence and control over financial and household managements, her career aspirations, yet '*betashar* sacrifice' was inevitable as 'they' (her husband's relatives) would not comprehend and welcome 'feminism' – '*I would not be able to explain it to them, it is useless*' - Dina concluded. While it was doable to advocate for her needs and values within the confines of their own apartment, it was complicated to decline *betashar* during formal ceremonies. Later, this 'sacrifice' was mitigated by Dina's conscious efforts to shape her marriage around specific arrangements.

At the middle of the interview, she reflected upon her father's words, as he referred to Dina's husband '*where do you find that kind of lohi (losers) who do not even have their own apartment?*'. I noticed peculiar and recurring interpretative frames pertaining to ownership of apartment, newlyweds' living arrangements and women's agency, thus I followed this storyline by asking what does it mean for her? Dina explained that they currently live in her apartment as it was her parents' gift that gives her a sense of '*moralnaya podderzhka'* (moral support). Beka's (her husband) parents would have been happy to provide newlyweds with their first establishment, but they had no financial capacity to do so, and they felt disadvantaged as they were not able to provide their only son with an apartment – '*hatu ne postavili, kak-to ne po-kazakhski*' (they did not give an apartment to their only son, which is regarded as 'not Kazakh like'). Likewise, it became evident that their living arrangement, irrespectively of where newlyweds live in respect to their relatives, puts Beka's parents at a disadvantaged position, while Dina feels secure and confident – a sense of confidence comes from knowing that if her husband fails or would 'commit infidelity, resort to alcohol or become inadequate or even die', she will always have a place to go. Likewise, her husband's marital decision-making horizon

might be influenced by their living arrangement, as Dina subtly noted that she introduces practices and norms while her husband agrees and follows.

Dina continued by narrating how living in her apartment was a strategic choice as it gives her space to maneuver and feel secure, or even '*mogu pozvolit zakatit skandal v tri utra*' (I can initiate a scandal at three in the morning If I want to). Dina and Beka arrange their marriage around the '50/50' rule which corresponds with Dina's perception of a 'good feminism', and as she indicated '*I think that Beka simply embraced my rules of the game, and he endorsed them*'. Nonetheless, this rule does not work infallibly, there are '*perekosy*' (imbalances) and 'not in favor of a woman' – she concluded. The '50/50' rule is their choice and the form of exchange that gives Dina an opportunity to focus on career aspirations, yet it also means that she is responsible for supplying household with '*kopeechka*' (money) and thus she was responsible for maintaining and managing the family budget for two years, while Beka was unemployed and took care of their son.

6.4. *Navigating Kinship Dynamics: The Concept of Practices*

This section delves into the complex interplay between residence patterns and marital agency as experienced by women in urban Kazakhstan. While the narratives do not all stem from identical residence arrangements, they reveal the intricate challenges that women face in navigating kin relations. These accounts showcase the association between newlyweds' living arrangement and their marital dynamics, influence the distribution of power within the household, and the extent to which women can exercise agency. By examining these diverse experiences, this section aims to illuminate the ways in which traditional expectations and modern aspirations collide and coalesce, ultimately contributing to a nuanced understanding of women's roles within their marriages and in relations with extended kin.

Among all the debates and skillful analysis, I still find it puzzling if it is even possible to apply a conventional wisdom of kinship theory on how people do and perform it in practice.

How do a glimpse into the privacy of household affairs, words and sentences, decisions and acts 'translate' into analyses and discourses we call 'research'? I would like to stick to the premise that 'individual agency triumphs over social structure', yet when it comes to family, then 'doing family involved doing the right thing for other people' (Duncan and Carter 2022, 51). Marriage is therefore a playground where individuals get to develop a sense of agency and agentive powers essential to both maintaining family connections and fulfilling self-projects.

The concept of practices pays great attention at how individuals act and perform family, what they do on the daily basis, how do they manage and navigate within a web of interpersonal relations – the process of finding a social fit through constant conscious and unconscious adaptations. Likewise, family and marriage can be seen as the institutions in transition where 'the patterns of family life, including marriage will be recast…' and that marriage and other social arrangements are 'intensely personal…Micro-level interactions and processes profoundly shape the day-to-day lived realities of marriage' (Zinn et al 2011, 253). Likewise, understanding social institutions necessitates reading into human behavior 'in any of its manifestation', the 'projection outwards of the individuals' experience of growth and change within the continuity of his/her identity' (Fortes 2006, 64).

It is imperative to highlight that while women in my study occasionally delineated household tasks along traditional gender lines, identifying certain chores as 'womanly' and others as 'manly', this distinction primarily served as a discursive tool for critiquing and re-evaluating the appropriateness of such divisions. This critique extended beyond the domestic sphere, reflecting broader social and cultural attitudes towards gendered labor. More significantly, these women actively reflected on how they have renegotiated and transformed these divisions within their family lives. However, what emerges as more salient in their narratives is not the persistence of gendered scripts but the centrality of relationships and the quality of interaction between partners, and relatives. Interviewed women tend to emphasize

the importance of mutual understanding, partnership, and agreements, indicating a shift away from rigid gender norms towards a more relational and egalitarian model of household and family management. This suggests that women's agency is increasingly defined by their ability to prioritize relationship dynamics over traditional roles, fostering a more collaborative domestic sphere.

In the context of my research, it is crucial to differentiate between traditional practices and relatives' or in-laws' intrusions because the two represent different layers of influence upon newlyweds' marriage. On the one hand, traditional practices refer to culturally sanctioned norms and rituals that guide behaviors within familial structures, such as co-residential expectations or the role of the daughter-in-law. These practices are embedded in historical, cultural, and social frameworks, that are passed down through generations and serve to maintain kinship ties (Werner 2009). Likewise, they are often associated with an idealized model of familial and gendered roles, emphasizing duty, continuity and cooperation – as if human relations are static and sterile. On the other hand, relatives' intrusions, as documented in many of the women's narratives, often go beyond these traditional practices, but they are framed and perceived as mechanism for maintaining order, continuity, duty, and respect – values that are central to Kazakh identity. This is how interactions and individual actors can reinvent certain elements of traditions to fulfill personal needs and interests. By framing intrusions and unsolicited advice as acts of maintaining cultural continuity and family unity, individuals – particularly parents and in-laws – reshape traditional expectations to justify their involvement in newlyweds' decision-making. While these interactions can be perceived as part of *Kazakhshylyq*[23] (Kazakhness), they also serve parents' personal interests, such as ensuring

[23] During interviews, informants often describe certain family practices as intrinsic to 'being Kazakh' – '*Kazakhness*'. By means of framing customs like patrilocal residence (co-residence in particular), son preference, the notion of 'mom's sons', the social role of *kelin*, and in-laws' expectations as distinctly Kazakh, they add to existing interpretative repertoires and construct a cultural identity in which these practices uphold a shared collective identity and heritage.

proximity to children and maintaining an influence over the newlyweds' household. For women, these dynamic offers opportunities to negotiate, bargain or adapt to external influences without outright rejection of tradition – in a sense, women's response to intrusions cannot be framed as resistance to traditional practices, because parental control and interventions are not viewed as 'tradition' or deviations from tradition, but rather as elements of kinship relations. Therefore, while tense relations between *kelins* and in-laws often challenge newlyweds' autonomy, communication with extended kin is an integral part of kinship dynamics. The narratives of women demonstrate how women tend to reflect frequently on the quality of these relations, reflect on balancing respect and personal agency and overall, both consciously and unconsciously negotiate this terrain.

6.5. *Patrilocal and Bilocal Arrangements*

Gaukhar's narrative exemplifies a broader theme in this chapter – how the navigation of kin relations is deeply influenced by the spatial arrangements of where a couple lives. When it comes to matrilineal or patrilineal arrangements, then there is 'no clear evidence of either side being constantly favored' - this derives from the idea that supportive ties and relational commitments rely on 'how kinship interacts with relationship quality', and how individuals get to build and maintain relationships (Power and Ready 2019, 114). Family relations, be it cooperation and social support, or misunderstandings and conflict – are never static. Therefore, instead of understanding what family and marriage is, it is more fruitful to question how individuals perform family and marriage, and what acts and performances count as 'doing family'.

Initially, Gaukhar and her husband co-resided patrilocally with her husband's mother. This arrangement was associated with significant challenges, as traditional expectations clashed with Gaukhar's desire for autonomy. She shared:

My mother-in-law used to judge me by using sharp words. Elder people do not always understand what personal boundaries mean, so she used to unexpectedly break into out room. She was irritated by the fact that I do not cook. Fortunately, my husband was always on my side. (Gaukhar)

Gaukhar's patrilocal co-residence was conditioned by two reasons. First, newlyweds did not have their own apartment, and they strategically planned to save up money and invest into their own place. Second, in accordance with unwritten rules of patriarchy, matrilocal co-residence was not even considered – furthermore, Gaukhar is not close with her mother and did not rely upon her support. She, nonetheless, had support from her grandfather, yet he did not possess enough resources to assist newlyweds financially, but provided emotional encouragement and comfort. To provide a comparison, another informant Nargiz and her husband from Almaty, who live neolocally shared that, for their couple, patrilocal co-residence was not an option because of their couple's values and independence, career perspectives and her husband's ownership of the apartment in Almaty – her parents live in Astana, while his in Semey, Eastern-Kazakhstan. Nonetheless, family practices and individual behavior of her husband's relatives have long been a puzzlement. She reflected upon his brother, let us code him as Nur, who 'is a very traditional Kazakh – domineering, alpha-male'. Within Nargiz's nuclear family, the responsibilities around household chores are shared equally between the husband and wife, thus her husband was notified that, as Nargiz reflected 'I know how things work in Kazakhstan, so I will not turn from your wife into your mother. I will not clean after you, nor will I cook for you – if you agree, then let's marry'. Even if these rules and dynamic satisfy their coupledom, Nur came forward to speak of his discontent. Nargiz described her experience of accommodating and familiarizing herself with her husband's family systems as follows:

Usually, it is a mother-in-law who infuses fear, in my case, it is my husband's brother – but he does not really invade our personal life, except for the demands to stay at his apartment during our visits to Astana. (Nargiz)

Nargiz reflected upon their visit to Astana, where Nur and his family reside, as do Nargiz's parents. Likewise, the question of where newlyweds will stay overnight lead to the conflict of interests. Nargiz rationalized that they should stay at her parents' home because Nur's apartment is smaller, and full of children, and there is no separate room for the couple, while her parents have a spacious three-bedroom apartment. Irrespectively of both Nargiz and her husband's rationale, Nur required the couple to stay with his family because when Nargiz 'joined their family' and must spend less time in her natal home – this rhetoric aggravated Nargiz and she chose to pop out to her parents, while her husband stayed at Nur's. Nargiz concluded with:

I knew that we should live neolocally, because both my and his relatives could potentially intrude into our family life – it is better to love each other on distance. (Nargiz)

Thus, the conflicts might be among different family members, and are usually associated with attempts or unsolicited advice to impose conventional gender roles. When Gaukhar voiced her interests, her mother-in-law instigated conflicts.

We (Gaukhar and her husband) used to try to mitigate conflicts with his mother gently, yet we quickly realized that she does not understand us – she resorted to manipulations, she was hysterically packing her suitcases and pretending to leave. (Gaukhar)

However, Gaukhar's narrative also demonstrates how these tensions can be mitigated through strategic shifts in residence. Their move to a bilocal arrangement led to a major transformation in their marriage, one that allowed Gaukhar to redefine her role and establish more equitable relations within her household.

> *After the last argument, we sold the car and moved out, but we tried to smooth things over – leaving gradually rather than abruptly. After the move, we stopped irritating her, and our relationship improved. It turned out we were just an eyesore to her*. (Gaukhar)

The physical and emotional distance from her mother-in-law afforded her greater freedom to negotiate her position as an equal partner in the marriage, rather than conforming to the more hierarchical structure that was expected of her in a patrilocal co-residence. For instance, her mother-in-law expected Gaukhar to clean and cook for her husband, while the newlywed couple had its own arrangements, where Gaukhar's husband was content with dividing household responsibilities as '50/50' – her husband actively rejected traditional gender division of household chores, taking on responsibilities typically assigned to women by cooking and cleaning alongside Gaukhar. Their approach not only challenged conventional norms, but those that were advanced by Gaukhar's mother-in-law. This dynamic is prevalent across most of the women's narratives, where husbands were willing to share household responsibilities or gradually learned to internalize equitable routines, while relatives viewed it as inappropriate. This pattern reflects a shift away from the traditional expectations that women should be the sole nurturers and caretakers of the home. Instead, these couples are engaging in more balanced partnerships, where both spouses contribute to the managements of domestic life.

Although traditional expectations suggested by parents or relatives persist, newlyweds often bypass the actual implementation of these practices through direct conflict, open communication, or by moving out – using a change of residence to mitigate misunderstandings and tensions through distance. This dynamic is likely associated with the increasing number of women who earn their own income, as financial independence often correlates with assertiveness, egalitarian partnership, and a renegotiation of domestic roles (Ashwin 2004, 205; Werner 2009, 324).

Gaukhar's narrative showcases a strong sense of autonomy, she frequently emphasized the importance of her professional and personal development, continuing to work and engage in hobbies even after marriage. The discursive pattern of 'I continued to work after marriage, and it was my decision' is an instrumental move in many women's narratives. It reflects a conscious assertion of autonomy, because maintaining employment allows women to resist traditional expectations that, usually, prioritize domestic chores over professional development. This choice is pivotal for agency, as it provides financial independence, fosters personal growth, and most importantly, enables women to negotiate power dynamics within the household, irrespectively of what power relationships are at play – with husband, with women's or husbands' parents and relatives. For Gaukhar, this independent stance allowed her to bargain over the role within the household, ensuring that her husband took on some responsibilities traditionally assigned to women – even if Gaukhar's mother-in-law did not approve of that. When her mother-in-law expressed discontent, saying: 'He is a man, why should he do it?', Gaukhar and her husband stood firm, explaining that they have decided to share responsibilities equally. Despite these challenges, Gaukhar maintained open communication with her husband, she reassured him that moving out, even without having fully saved for their own apartment, was necessary for their relationship's well-being. Gaukhar's husband supported her decision, stating: 'We are a team, and we will sort things out with my mother later' – emphasizing their partnership and shared commitment to independence from traditional familial pressures, or at least, from mother-in-law's intrusions.

In terms of agency, Gaukhar's story illustrates how a change in residence can be a crucial act of self-assertion. Her ability to influence the decision to move and the support she received from her husband were key factors in enhancing her sense of control within the marriage. Although, the initial intention was to utilize co-residence as a means to save money for purchasing their own apartment, the escalating conflicts between Gaukhar and her mother-in-

law ultimately compelled the couple to move out earlier than anticipated, before they were able to accumulate sufficient funds.

When it comes to interpretative repertoires, then Gaukhar's narrative is framed around the challenges she faced while co-residing with her mother-in-law. Throughout her story, she frequently engages in negotiation, both with her husband and indirectly with her mother-in-law; she consistently emphasizes the importance of mutual support and partnership in her marriage. Gaukhar's narrative showcases how this partnership was tested and ultimately strengthened through their decision to move away from the patrilocal setting.

The main patterns in Gaukhar's narrative are:

1. Autonomy vs. Tradition: Her struggle for autonomy against the traditional gender roles is a recurring theme. Her narrative often contrasts her personal values with the expectations of her mother-in-law.
2. Egalitarian Partnership: The emphasis on equality in her marriage, particularly in decision-making and household responsibilities, appears frequently, suggesting a pattern of redefining traditional marital roles.
3. Boundaries and Space: The physical and emotional boundaries established by moving to a bilocal residence play a significant role in her narrative. This pattern indicates the importance of spatial arrangements in shaping marital dynamics.

6.6. *Patrilocal and Neolocal Arrangements*

Another informants' narrative, who is given the pseudonym of Symbat, resonates with my exploration of the interplay between residence patterns and women's agency in marriage. Similar to my personal narrative, Symbat's experience is marked by a continuous negotiation of her role within a context of shifting residence patterns because her life is characterized by frequent relocations across countries and cities, which adds a layer of complexity to how she navigates her marital and familial dynamics. The key repertoire in her narrative is her ability

to adapt to constant change, whether it involves moving between countries or adjusting to new family dynamics. Unlike more static residence patterns, Symbat and her husband have lived in Malaysia, Turkey, as they have also co-resided with her husband's parents in Kazakhstan, Astana. This constant relocation has significantly shaped how Aizhan 'does marriage' - her story highlights the need to be flexible, both in her roles as a wife and mother, and in her relationship with in-laws. Likewise, her narrative showcases a complex evolution in her relations with her husband, particularly influenced by their shifting living arrangements.

Early in their marriage, Symbat and her husband experienced significant challenges while co-residing with her husband's parents. Her husband's deep connection with his mother initially created a sense of distance in their own relationship. During this time, Symbat often felt sidelined, as her husband would frequently consult his mother on important decisions, sometimes even before discussing them with her. This dynamic left Symbat feeling secondary, and she struggled with the fact that her mother-in-law seemed to have a stronger influence on him than she did. However, the dynamic began to shift when they transitioned to a neolocal arrangement, living independently: '*Following our relocation to Malaysia, we developed our own way of living, our own habits – everything was around our family, just us. We became stronger as a family*'. This relocation allowed their couple to create their own space, both physically and emotionally, which was crucial in strengthening their relationship. Away from the immediate influence of his mother, Symbat's husband began to rely more on his wife for advice and decision-making. This shift in their living arrangement marked a turning point, as it allowed them to focus on each other and less on external familial expectations.

The main patterns in Symbat's narrative are:

1. Mobility and Transience: A central pattern in her narrative is the constant movement – this frequent relocation shaped her marital dynamics, requiring her to continually adapt to new environments.

2. Negotiation of Agency: Her husband's close relationship with his mother left Symbat feeling misunderstood, over time, she learned to communicate her needs more effectively, eventually gaining a stronger voice in decision-making processes – a neolocal transition facilitated her growing confidence and ability to negotiate.
3. Strained Family Relations: The tension between Symbat and her mother-in-law, particularly during co-residence, is a notable pattern. The struggle to establish boundaries and navigate the expectations of her husband's family caused a significant strain in the early years of her marriage.

6.7. *Neolocal and Matrilocal Arrangements*

It is worth noting that Aruzhan and I had known each other from school, though we had not maintained close contact over the years. Thus, it was particularly surprising that our interview lasted nearly three hours and was filled with personal revelations and emotional insights. This extended conversation allowed for a deeper exploration of her experiences and provided a rich narrative that sheds light on the complexities of her marital and personal life. Her narrative reveals several important patterns, particularly regarding her experience of neolocal living in Astana, and later her matrilocal move to Zhezqazgan.

Aruzhan and her husband initially lived independently in Astana, which gave her a sense of personal autonomy, free from the immediate influence of parents and relatives. Just like other women in neolocal arrangements, she emphasized that it allowed her to set the terms of household management and establish boundaries within her marriage. Nonetheless, while she enjoyed living neolocally, her marital relations were constantly shaken by her husband's parents' intrusions through distance – traditional expectations and family ties can continue to shape and influence a couple's experiences, particularly the agency of women within marriage. Parental intrusion took multiple forms, from unsolicited advice to more direct interventions in their personal lives. For example, Aruzhan mentioned how her mother-in-law would frequently

call and inquire about their household decisions, sometimes questioning their choices on how they should manage their finances and lifestyle.

> *My husband saw it, he was displeased, but still, they are his parents – this is how their relationship works. His parents always borrowed money from us as if it is not that big of a deal, while we never asked for their help. Interestingly, when we really needed help, then we had to ask my parents somehow. My husband used to call my father directly to ask for money, but he never asked his own father*. (Aruzhan)

This level of interference and the dynamic of the relationships, despite the physical distance, reflected the enduring nature of parental involvement in Kazakh families, where even neolocal living does not necessarily shield newlyweds from familial expectations and support needs.

> *I try to completely separate myself from my parents so that I do not depend on them at all, neither financially nor in decision-making. But he often thinks about how to make sure his parents don't worry about anything. So, it is not entirely working out for us yet; we have not fully separated, because whenever we're about to do something, we still think - what will the parents say?* (Aruzhan)

According to Aruzhan, the emotional and psychological proximity between her husband and his parents allowed for this ongoing influence. Although she desired to create and maintain a boundary between their independent life and her in-laws' involvement, this was often difficult to achieve due to her husband's reluctance to push back against his parent's expectations. However, she continuously engages in discussions with her husband, reassuring and convincing him that: '*Let's save our own butts first, and then we can help your parents later. And after these conversations, he starts to listen a bit more*'. After initially living neolocally, she and her husband made decision to move to Zhezqazgan, where they settled matrilocally, near her family. This move introduced new dynamics into their household. Aruzhan thought that with this matrilocal move, her husband's parents would be discontent, likely because they

would prefer their son to live near them, conforming to traditional patrilocal norms and retaining influence over the couple. However:

> *They might be jealous, in a way, but they understand that the move is beneficial for their son, because in Zhezqazgan, my uncles have many connections that are helpful for my husband's work. So, thanks to my relatives, he is building connections and gaining credibility. If for example, only my grandparents lived here, his parents would be upset that I spend too much time with them, but sorry, my grandmother is already 85 years old*. (Aruzhan)

Interestingly, if only her elderly grandparents were present in Zhezqazgan, without influential uncles who assist Aruzhan husband in his career, her husband's parents would likely have expressed concerns for the amount of time she spends with them, potentially viewing it as an imbalance in her familial obligations. This showcases the gendered expectations placed on Aruzhan, where caregiving responsibilities towards her natal family could be viewed negatively by her in-laws. This is why Aruzhan defends her spending time with her grandmother by pointing to her advanced age, framing her caregiving as not only a duty but a necessity. What is more important, while matrilocal arrangement might traditionally provoke discontent among her husband's family, the social and professional advantages of living near her relatives reshape this dynamic. This scenario reflects adaptations within Kazakh family practices, where traditional norms are bypassed or adjusted in favor of more pragmatic considerations.

The main patterns in Aruzhan's narrative are:

1. Negotiation of Family Priorities: Aruzhan frequently reflects on discussions with her husband that are aimed at balancing their immediate needs with the expectations of supporting his parents – it emphasizes the importance of prioritizing their own stability before extending help to relatives.

2. Strategic Use of Familial Resources: The matrilocal move highlights Aruzhan's ability to leverage her family's social and financial connections, which benefits her husband professionally and enhances her influence within the marriage.
3. Balancing Caregiving Responsibilities and Personal Autonomy: Living matrilocally, on the other hand, places additional caregiving responsibilities on Aruzhan, but she navigates these obligations while maintaining her autonomy and managing her relationship with in-laws through distance.

6.8. *Bilocal Arrangements: The Comparison*

Another informants, Ayala and Lyazzat from Astana, provide a perspective on how newlyweds navigate their bilocal living arrangement. From their narratives, it is evident that the newlyweds' bilocal residence is characterized by a balance, enabling them to maintain strong familial connections with both families, while fostering their own autonomy as the nuclear families.

While these couples resemble each other, Lyazzat's experience is marked by a cooperative and egalitarian partnership with her husband, where both engage in decision-making and household responsibilities. Importantly, Lyazzat alluded to specific dynamics within her family of origin that she was keen to avoid replicating in her own marriage. She explicitly mentioned her discomfort with how men in her family, especially those from her sisters' marriages, often did little to contribute to household chores or child-rearing. This was a significant factor in her fear of marriage, as she did not want her own relationship to mirror these patterns. Lyazzat's reluctance was clearly articulated, when she stated that: 'I was very afraid of marriage because I really did not like the model that developed in my sisters' marriages…the men in their households did nothing, did not spend time with their children, and that really did not sit well with me'. Her family is originally from Shymkent, Southern Kazakhstan, and she further elaborated that her determination to avoid such a situation influenced her decision to marry

someone who did not conform to these traditional, patriarchal expectations. Her narrative touches upon a broader and complex phenomenon where women consciously choose to diverge from the familial patterns that they have observed in their natal homes. Lyazzat's decision, therefore, is not a reaction against the husband's family or traditional practices, but rather a nuanced response to the dynamics she experienced growing up. She numerously emphasized that her fear of marriage stemmed not from an anxiety over her future husband's family, nor his personality, but from the desire to avoid replicating the imbalances she saw at home and in her sisters' marriages.

Unlike the traditional gender roles she observed in her sisters' marriages, Lyazzat and her husband have a more balanced approach. They split household chores, she mentioned that they 'always discuss and decide together', ensuring that neither of them is overburdened. Her marriage is also characterized by mutual respect and emotional support, which she views as foundational to their partnership. She highlighted that her husband respects her need to pursue her own interests and career – this respect for her autonomy is a key aspect of their egalitarian relationship, contrasting with the more controlling or dismissive attitudes she noticed in other marriages within her family.

On the other hand, Ayala's narrative reveals the challenges of navigating a more traditional familial structure, particularly in the context of her husband's close relationship with his mother. The discursive pattern of 'husbands' being close to their mothers' is notable apparent in women's narratives. Arguably, it reflects the deep-rooted cultural expectation that sons, especially in patrilineal societies like Kazakhstan, tend to maintain strong ties with their parents even after marriage. From narratives, this closeness often manifests itself in the form of emotional and practical interdependence, and frequent involvement of husbands' parents into newlyweds' life. Having discussed it with numerous women, this dynamic is oftentimes framed as a demonstration of familial continuity, loyalty and performances of respect and love, it

nonetheless can sometimes challenge the boundaries of newlyweds' nuclear family. Women's reflections upon this dynamic showcase how traditional kinship obligations continue to shape the day-to-day interactions, obligations, and power dynamics within modern urban Kazakh households.

Even if Ayala and her husband live separately, initially, this dynamic posed obstacles to Ayala's ability to assert herself within the marriage, as her husband's allegiance to his mother often took precedence. However, over time, Ayala's relationship with her mother-in-law evolved, transforming from a potential source of tension into an opportunity for cooperation. Ayala's narrative illustrates how living separately from her mother-in-law has positively influenced their relationship dynamic. Without daily proximity and potential for friction that often accompanies patrilocal co-residence, Ayala and her mother-in-law were able to establish a more respectful relationship. Ayala noted that their bond deepened over time, and her mother-in-law having only two sons, had always longed for a daughter, and Ayala seamlessly stepped into that role, becoming the daughter her mother-in-law always wished for.

Ayala's narrative, like many others, places a significant emphasis on her relationship with mother-in-law, with little mention of her father-in-law. This is a common pattern in many family dynamics, where the mother-in-law often plays a more central and influential role in the daughter-in-law's life. In Ayala's case, her mother-in-law was deeply involved in welcoming her into the family and establishing their relationship. This focus, as I suggest, may reflect the cultural expectations placed on mothers-in-law as the primary figures who uphold family traditions and engage directly with daughters-in-law, influencing their integration into the family. Likewise, Ayala's father-in-law is rarely mentioned, which indicates that his role in her daily life and their familial relationship is less prominent. Overall, this pattern is indicative of the recurrent social and cultural dynamics where the mother-in-law's role in *kelin's* life if usually more scrutinized, shaping much of the newlywed's internal relationship.

6.9. *Matrilocal and Bilocal Arrangements: The Comparison*

Although both women live within close proximity to their natal families, their interactions with these families – and the resulting support or lack thereof – differ significantly, shaping their marital experiences in unique ways. Nazerke's matrilocal nearby residence, initially suggests that she might benefit from the closeness and support typically associated with this living arrangement. Especially, given the fact that her husband's parents live in Western Kazakhstan and newlyweds do not communicate or interact with them frequently. However, Nazerke's relationship with her own mother is notably strained, to the point where they do not communicate. This disconnect challenges the traditional expectations of matrilocality, where a daughter would usually rely on her natal family, especially her mother for emotional or practical support. Nazerke's narrative reveals that despite her physical proximity to her mother, there is a profound emotional distance that leaves her without the familial backing one might expect. Their personal dynamic not only limits the potential benefits of matrilocality but also highlights how physical proximity does not necessarily translate into support or any other familial interactions.

When I followed up by asking about the intricacies of Nazerke's relationship with her mother, Nazerke explained that her decision to distance herself from her family of origin was influenced by the longstanding conflict and aggression she experienced within her family. The transcript clearly reflects Nazerke's feelings towards her mother, where she explains that:

> *I just can't talk to her, she has always been too aggressive. I did not want that kind of environment around me anymore, so I've kept my distance*. (Nazerke)

This quote summarizes her motivation for distancing herself and choosing to navigate her marriage without the influence of her mother, despite living matrilocally. Likewise, their ongoing tension led Nazerke to consciously withdraw from her mother, despite living in close proximity, as a way to maintain her own emotional well-being and to avoid replicating the

patterns of conflicts in her own marriage. She emphasized that creating a different kind of family environment was crucial, one that was not affected by the aggression she associated with her natal home. Following her narrative, I noticed that this distancing was not just a physical act but an emotional one, which reflected Nazerke's desire to establish a healthier, more peaceful dynamic with her husband free from the negativity she observed growing up.

In contrast, Aya lives in a bilocal arrangement, where she and her husband are connected to both sets of parents, but do not reside with either of them. Despite this distance, Aya maintains a strong and supportive relationship with her natal family. This connection is crucial, as her family frequently provides both emotional and practical help – even if Aya enjoys backing from her husband's parents as well. Her narrative reflects benefits of bilocality, where the couple can maintain autonomy while still benefiting from their extended family's support when needed. This support system seems to enhance Aya's sense of security and stability within her marriage, even when she and her husband might experience conflict. In other words, the support system provided by their extended families, offers Aya reassurance, allowing her to navigate marital challenges with the encouragement of her family and her husband's parents. This reminds of Ismailbekova's (2015) work on women in the village of Bulak, who use the leverages offered by patriarchy to alleviate their status and authority in family matters. Likewise, Aya leverages support from both sets of parents to 'manipulate' her husband and assert her influence over their nuclear family's decision making – in other words, she makes use of the communal aspect of Kazakh family life , and the overall value associated with marriage, for her personal benefit.

6.10. *'Doing' over 'Being'*

Family practices revolve around a set of senses that include – a sense of active, a sense of everyday, a sense of the regular and a sense of fluidity. These family practices are hardly universal, 'a sense of regular' for a random family might 'be peculiar to members of a particular

household or set of family members – 'family' jokes, rituals' (Morgan 2011, 7). Despite blood connections, who included or excluded from the family depends on who asks the question and 'on the circumstances in which the designation of family membership might be seen as important' – and this is where a sense of fluidity comes from (Morgan 2011, 7). Likewise, family practices boil down to 'doing' over 'being'. The terms 'family', 'patrilocal' and 'gender' present social life as variables, and might mask the practical action and deed, performance of an activity. When it comes to the expectations that are placed upon marriage and family, then family members tend to investigate and construct 'normal and abnormal family practices'; Thus, 'through attending classes, consulting advice books or reading articles in newspapers, individual family members monitor their everyday practices in terms of notions as to what is to be proper mother or father, wife or husband' (Morgan 2011, 19). As an example of that, I can recall Madina who co-resided with her husband's parents to later move out neolocally. This shift did not happen by coincidence, but rather through her systematic negotiations with her husband. In her case, co-residence appeared to negatively escalate her relationship with her mother-in-law and for months Madina did not understand if this situation was normal or not. Eventually she turned her attention towards social media and noticed that other Kazakh married women complained about their experiences of co-residence with in-laws – she learned that other women, just like her, find this living arrangement inconvenient, to say the least. This knowledge verified that her feelings were not spontaneous or whimsical, it is rather a shared conviction that co-residence rarely better the relationship between *kelin* and in-laws.

Faced with everyday conflicts and marital dilemmas, particularly those involving Madina's in-laws, she found it culturally inappropriate to openly share her struggles with other. In Kazakh society, the concept of *uyat* – the sense of shame – strongly discourages the public disclosure of familial and marital misunderstandings, or everything relating to household matters. Since this norm of *uyat* has been internalized and guided Madina's actions, she turned

to anonymity of online searches, where she searched for validation and evidence that her experience was not unique and was indeed shared by many other women in Kazakhstan. Through these online investigations, she encountered narratives of other women who struggled with similar challenges of in-law interventions, which eventually provided Madina a sense of solidarity. Importantly, by turning to the online space, Madina managed to navigate and push the constraints of *uyat* – a pattern in which women, constrained by the expectations of family loyalty, seek for alternative forms of emotional support to then develop new ways of doing family.

6.11. *Marriage: Contrasting Wives' and Husband's Narratives*

In exploring the evolving family practices in urban Kazakhstan, it is essential to consider the narratives of both women and men as they navigate the complexities of marriage and interpersonal relations with extended kin. While women's narratives offer insights into marriage and family relations, the perspectives of their husbands are complementary, yet sometimes contrasting, viewpoint on the same questions and processes. Likewise, this section overviews the responses of interlocutors' husbands to the same questions. Husbands' responses revealed how 'doing' of the same family can be interpreted differently within one household.

While most of the interviewed newlyweds' family models are framed around dual-earner marriages, responses indicate that women's autonomy and assertiveness in decision-making is not contingent on their financial contribution. Women's decision-making power in marriage stems from their determination and ability to challenge traditional gender roles and reach mutual agreements. As a result, decisions related to key household matter and relations with extended kin are not resolved without her input or consent, ensuring that low-control tasks or significant strategic issues are addressed collaboratively. However, the comparison of the wives' and husbands' responses suggests that the coupledom might have differences in perception that derives from the intricacies of spousal communication.

6.12. *Matrilocal Nearby Residence, Astana*

Analyzing and comparing responses and individual perspectives, aids in gaining insights into the ways traditional family structures are negotiated and shaped through personal agency, contextual factors, such as residence patterns or employment contexts. From Assel's husband's responses, he places significant emphasis on joint decision-making, particularly in financial and household matters. He also notes that his wife Assel continues to work because 'she wanted to', implicitly acknowledging her autonomy in decision related to career. Interestingly, despite his emphasis on shared decision-making, there are minor differences in the ways each partner perceives their roles in these decisions. While the husband prioritizes joint decision-making, his wife experiences greater personal autonomy and responsibility in domains such as career and household management. This divergence in their responses can be indicative of broader gender dynamics, where women's expanded role in managing both domestic and external affairs can be perceived as a part of a cooperative relationship. It suggests that Assel may experience a more pronounced sense of autonomy than her husband's responses might indicate.

The division of labor in their marriage appears to be both traditional and flexible. According to her husband, Assel manages their household because 'she is more responsible' – while this commentary acknowledges her competence, it still aligns with traditional expectations of women's responsibilities within the home. On the one hand, their division of labor may not be a mere reflection of traditional gender roles, because Assel manages to maintain a balance between 'being responsible' at home and 'being responsible' with her career choices. On the other hand, this arrangement is a practical and a joint decision, shaped by several contextual factors such as work schedules – her husband works on a rotational basis in Western Kazakhstan, which means that he is frequently away from home. Assel's narrative further elaborates on the nature of this division. If she views these responsibilities

as part of her personal choice rather than an expectation imposed by traditional norms, it will undermine her agency in managing their household, while maintaining a successful career. In contrast, her husband's perspective might be more aligned with conventional frameworks, where he views her responsibilities as an extension of inherent qualities such as 'being responsible', rather than acknowledging the role of joint negotiations in establishing these dynamics.

Their couple resides matrilocally, living closer to Assel's parents. According to her husband, their living arrangement does not afford Assel any privileges. In contrast, Assel suggested that living closer to her natal kin provides her with emotional, financial, logistical support, which in turn enhance her decision-making power within the household. According to her, natal family is a strong support system, and it serves as a source of agency, even if her husband perceives matrilocality as neutral in terms of power dynamics. However, his broader reflections reveal awareness of how residence patterns can affect women's agency and freedom in traditional Kazakhstani families. He suggested that living apart from both sets of parents, or neolocally, even within the same city, allows newlyweds to maintain autonomy and assert personal boundaries.

The comparison of their responses reveals both alignment and differences in their perceptions of agency and residence arrangements. While the couple emphasize shared decision-making, Assel's autonomy is more pronounced. Their matrilocal residence provides an opportunity for a more nuanced comparison. While the husband downplays the influence of proximity to Assel's family, it indeed affords her greater support and power than he acknowledges.

6.13. *Bilocal Residence, Astana*

Leila's husband acknowledges her agency, particularly in her career choices, stating that she stopped working because she is '*looking for something she enjoys*' and that he does not

want her to pursue work that she dislikes – it, arguably, highlights a degree of respect. In contrast to Assel's husband, who prefers joint decision-making, Leila's husband offers a more nuanced perspective on family decisions. While he agrees that significant household decisions are shared, he also states that when it comes to weekend plans, they each follow their own preferences (he is responsible for routine weekends, while Leila chooses for larger vacations). His response suggests that there is an informal and well-articulated balance of power, where different domains of decision-making are negotiated between the partners depending on the context. As indicated by her husband, Leila's agency, particularly in terms of larger family decisions, is more fluid and situational than fully autonomous – this perception is strikingly different from what was shared by Leila in our interview.

While he does not rigidly enforce this division, Leila's husband assigns several traditional tasks to her, such as budgeting, laundry, dishwashing, and meal preparation. Unlike in more traditional households, where the division of labor is non-negotiable, Leila's responsibilities within their household are more practical, and based on individual capacity and willingness rather than a reflection of traditional gender roles.

Leila and her husband live in the same city with both of their parents, though they are relatively close to Leila's family, as they have purchased an apartment only a few kilometers away from her parents. According to her husband, this arrangement was based on practical concerns, and it does not afford Leila any specific privileges in their marriage, nor does it affect her sense of agency. He also downplays their bilocal residence arrangement, arguing that neither set of parents has a significant impact on their daily lives. On the contrary, according to Leila, her parents' support her indirectly by contributing to their couples' housing situation, they also provide more financial support than his parents. This influence from Leila's parents allows her to navigate her marital role with added resources. Furthermore, while her husband represented their nuclear family as independent from either

parents' support, Leila elaborated on how he, sometimes, feels disempowered by her father's material support in the form of expensive gifts or financial resources to maintain the high standard of living that Leila is accustomed to, which her husband cannot provide. This discrepancy might come from the expectation that a man must provide for his families, and acknowledging that his wife relies upon her family of origin would mean failure and incapacity on his side.

6.14. *Patrilocal and Neolocal Residences, Astana*

Madina's narrative reveals her struggles and determination to overcome external pressures from her husband's family. Despite their collaborative attempts to manage their household and future perspectives, their marriage is not free of tensions. From the beginning, Madina's husband viewed household management as her responsibility, following a more traditional approach. However, through negotiations, Madina gradually re-negotiated this dynamic, emphasizing that being solely responsible for household chores is unfair, and her husband has since taken on more active role in domestic duties. Their negotiations showcase how traditional norms and division of labor can change – defaulting to cultural and traditional expectations is responsive to individual preferences. Throughout her story, Madina was disapproving of traditional roles assigned and imposed by her in-laws, especially during patrilocal cohabitation. Her husband's responses acknowledge these tensions, and the decision to move neolocally has alleviated much of these tensions. While her husband initially resisted the idea of moving out, however he agreed under Madina's insistence. While the couple agreed that, in contrast to patrilocal co-residence, neolocal arrangement allows for freedom in decision-making and creates enough distance to prevent misunderstandings between Madina and in-laws, her husband's responses do not imply that their move was motivated by constant conflicts. His story suggests that neither of parents

affect their relationship, and that he makes enough effort to provide Madina with support and care.

Nonetheless, despite physical distance, Madina still faces pressures from her in-laws – yet, due to their move, her husband too, has begun to recognize the importance of maintaining boundaries with his parents, which reflects a growing understanding of Madina's need for autonomy. Their case highlights the ongoing negotiations between traditional expectations and individual preferences. Although both Madina and her husband come from traditional Kazakh backgrounds, they managed to redefine their roles within their nuclear family. In their new neolocal arrangement, her husband, while initially more influenced by traditional expectations of his parents, has shown flexibility and a willingness to adapt to his wife's needs. For him, their move improved their family's well-being and their mutual understanding, while Madina's account indicates a continuous struggle with emotional burden that derives from resisting traditional norms, negotiating, and persuading her husband.

6.15. *Matrilocal Nearby Residence, Astana*

As most of other newlywed couples, Nazerke and her husband adapted their relationship to both their individual needs and traditional norms. For instance, Nazerke's narrative highlights a strong sense of agency in her career aspirations, daily routines, and household management. From the beginning of their relationship, Nazerke made it clear that she wants to pursue her own path in terms of lifestyle choices and work. Her husband, on the other hand, had traditional views – he believed that his wife should not work and should dedicate herself to domestic duties, which is a common expectation in more traditional Kazakh families. To explain why the word 'traditional' is used in this analysis, it is necessary to point out that the word 'traditional' was used by Nazerke's husband himself, and was attributed to gendered division of labor.

As their relationship developed, he recognized that these were outdated beliefs that had to be adapted to their respective needs and interests, and now he fully supports Nazerke's personal endeavors. While her husband contributes 90% of the household income, Nazerke takes the lead on managing their budget, using tools like Excel to track their finances and how their income is distributed across their savings and expenses. Despite her husband's significant financial contribution, his responses suggest that he respects Nazerke's control over this domain, which only amplifies her agency within the marriage. When it comes to household chores, Nazerke internalized a traditional but flexible approach – she enjoys cooking and cleaning but does so on her own terms. For example, if she does not feel like cooking, the couple either orders food or her husband steps in to help with other responsibilities. Although traditional gender roles are present, they are not rigidly enforced. Instead, the couple adapts their responsibilities and roles depending on circumstances and a practical balance.

Nazerke and her husband live matrilocally, while her husband's parents live in Atyrau, Western Kazakhstan. Despite living close to her family, Nazerke reflected on her relationship with her parents as distance. Her family does not seem to provide her necessary emotional support, for Nazerker it is her marriage that represents a 'zone of safety', where she and her husband negotiate and create their own norms and rules. Her husband's responses also suggest that while he is aware of the potential for matrilocality to benefit and empower women, he does not see it having a strong impact on his wife or their marriage.

The comparison of Nazerke and husband's responses demonstrates a flexible marriage, where traditional gender roles are present but not rigid. While her husband initially held more traditional views, he adapted to Nazerke's desire for autonomy, demonstrating how individual relationship dynamic can re-invent certain traditional practices. Their distance

from both sets of parents also provides them with the necessary freedom and autonomy to manage and structure their nuclear family according to their needs.

6.16. *Bilocal Residence, Almaty*

Following Dina's narrative, from the start, she made it clear to her husband that she intended to continue working, as she has been building her career since the age of 15. To be more specific, she explicitly stated during their courtship that she would assert her independence through her career and personal self-projects, and that her career choices are non-negotiable – and her husband fully supported her choice. In his responses, Dina's husband emphasized her autonomy, stating that her career is not something he interferes with. He also noted that he appreciates that their financial contributions have always been equally shared – their case illustrates how traditional expectations of women taking on passive roles can be redefined. The couple agrees that their marriage is flexible, and responsibilities are shared in a pragmatic way – it was Dina's insistence on equality and collaborative approach that maintains their relationship as '50/50', which only emphasizes her agency in shaping how their marriage functions.

Even if the couple lives close to both sets of parents, Dina prefers to interact more frequently with her family, relying on her mother for logistical support such as picking up their child from daycare. Dina's husband downplays that proximity to her natal family offers her benefits, while Dina suggests that this arrangement allows her more flexibility and freedom in decision-making. It is frequent in many of the husband's responses across the cases that they tend to downplay the potential benefits that matrilocality, or close proximity to wife's family, might provide. This pattern suggests a husbands' tendency to minimize the impact of matrilocality, or they unwillingness to notice how it might affect their women, often focusing on the practical or financial reasons behind their living arrangement. On contrary, the wives frequently reflect on feeling more secure and autonomous due to the

support network, provided by their natal families. Given the differences in perceptions, I would suggest that there is a gap, where husbands may overlook or understate the ways in which proximity to a wife's family can empower her within the household or in relations with extended family.

6.17. *Patrilocal Co-Residence, Almaty*

In her narrative, Dayana did not place an emphasis on the relationships with her husband's parents. While living patrilocally and exhibiting an awareness of how this arrangement, co-residence in particular, affects other families, she remained largely detached from this dynamic. However, Dayana highlighted that she ensured they would not co-reside with her husband's parents by making this a key condition during pre-marital arrangements. Dayana's narrative indicates that she approached the idea of marriage pragmatically, choosing to delay the commitment until she completed her education. For Dayana, the relationship with her partner does not revolve around romantic impulses. Her husband, though initially enforced his agenda, respected her decision which allowed Dayana to take an upper hand in pacing the development of their relationship. While the husband respected her boundaries, his responses tend to emphasize a more collaborative approach, and less individualized view. He oftentimes describes their decision-making as shared, while Dayana's narrative depicts her as proactive. This difference in perception suggests that while her husband views their marriage as collaborative and mutual, Dayana sees herself as a driving force behind key arrangements.

From the women's narratives, a clear pattern emerges – prior to marriage, they ensure that their core values – whether education, autonomy, or career aspirations – will be preserved. Furthermore, it is often the women who take the initiative to raise key matters for discussion, as they also introduce important arrangements. Husbands, on the other hand, tend to either agree or propose alternative solutions – however, women tend to keep

negotiating if they feel uneasy, ensuring that the issues are addressed to their satisfaction. This pattern can be interpreted in two ways: it may stem from women's ability to reflect on their needs during dialogic interactions with the researcher, and overall, their ability to articulate their needs more clearly, alongside husbands' tendency to avoid delving deeper into discussions about marriage. Alternatively, it may indeed reflect a social dynamic where women are more likely to initiate and lead conversations on key marital issues. In either case, according to women's narratives, this pattern suggests that women tend to be more proactive in addressing issues pertaining to marriage and kin relations. Arguably, this finding could imply a gendered division in communication strategies.

As Dayana and her husband transitioned into married life, they seem to have achieved a balance in the division of household responsibilities. From the very beginning, Dayana made it clear that she valued personal space and autonomy, thus the couple never co-resided with his parents, nor did she experience the challenges of solo motherhood as her husband was actively involved in helping with their child. From their responses, it becomes evident that the couple have a shared understanding that, although Dayana's husband works full-time, household work is not 'helping' her but rather managing his equal share of duties.

The comparison of the responses showcases that their perceptions of marriage differ. While both admit shared decision-making, mutual understanding and support, Dayana emphasizes her autonomy. Her husband, on the other hand, views their relationship as collaborative, suggesting that they make decisions through open dialogue rather than acknowledging her proactive role. Furthermore, while her husband is involved in 'helping' with their child, Dayana narrated how the birth of their child made her household responsibilities more demanding and daily schedule less flexible – her husband's responses, on the other hand, suggest that he believes that their responsibilities around childcare are shared equally. This noticeable difference suggests that while they have reached a balance

in navigating their marital roles, Dayana feels pressured by juggling between multiple roles, which her husband might not fully appreciate and recognize.

6.18. *Chapter Summary*

This chapter delves into family practices and individual family dynamics, with an emphasis on how newlywed urban women negotiate living arrangements, gender and marital roles, relationships with extended kin, and the performance of their individual agency. Women's narratives suggest the ongoing tensions between traditional expectations and their individual self-projects. Constant negotiations do not disallow women to bargain over household management, career choices or residence arrangements, on contrary, external pressures and expectations expand women's decision-making horizon, demonstrating how urban women negotiate their sense of self within various family structures. The first part of the chapter synthesizes women's narratives by exploring how they define and exercise agency – recurring themes and patterns emerge from their narratives. A key focus of this chapter remains to be the role of residence patterns – whether nearby residence or cohabitation – and how these arrangements affect marital dynamics. The narratives suggest an overall pattern, where moving away from in-laws to neolocal arrangement often grants women greater autonomy and freedom, while cohabitation with in-laws tends to create tensions due to parental interference. In marriage, women need to act within new environments that are sometimes associated with pressures to which they must adapt – whether insisting on the change of residence or negotiating household duties with their husbands. For instance, Gaukhar's shift from patrilocal co-residence to bilocal living arrangement exemplifies how changing residence enabled her to renegotiate her marital role and resist the pressures imposed by her mother-in-law. While the couple's initial plan was to strategically use co-residence to accumulate funds for their own apartment, the constant friction between Gaukhar and her mother-in-law necessitated them to adapt and come up with an alternative plan – selling their car to move-out, so that to prevent

further escalation of the ongoing conflict. Conversely, women living in matrilocal or bilocal settings face different dynamics. For some women, proximity to their natal families provide them with support. For other women, it introduces challenges. Women's narratives suggest that natal family can become the source of both emotional and financial support, only if the quality of the relationship allows for it.

Lastly, the chapter also incorporates the responses of the husbands, which arguably offers a contrasting view of household dynamics. The comparison of the wives' and the husbands' responses suggest that while women frequently emphasize their independence and collaborative decision-making with their partners, husbands sometimes view their contributions as assistance rather than shared responsibility. Nevertheless, urban couples tend to prioritize open communication and equal partnership, thus even if traditional gender roles and power distribution remain influential, many couples are moving toward more egalitarian, flexible approaches to managing their family life. It is fair to point out that women's financial independence gives them the leverages to challenge conventional expectations and, therefore, assert their independence in both direct and subtle ways, and exert greater control over different domains of married life. If a woman has her own apartment or has particular career goals – she would surely emphasize it during the interview as something that gives her a sense of stability that stimulates assertiveness, boldness, and confidence in articulating and advocating her personal interests.

To conclude, this chapter illustrates that marriage and family in urban Kazakhstan are the playgrounds for constant negotiation, where women manage to balance tradition, personal autonomy, and relational commitments. However, urban women tend to engage with traditional practices selectively, often invoking them in their narratives only when these customs disrupt their everyday lives or challenge their personal values. When certain practices such as the close ties husbands maintain with their mothers – a re-imagined remnant of persistent patrilineal

preference – come into conflict with women's expectations from marriage, they tend to assert their agency deliberately. Rather than passively accepting the unwanted circumstances, women tend to purposefully resist and reconfigure their environment. The performance of a purposeful agency targets the transforming of traditional structures and gendered expectations, resulting in new arrangements that develop inti more egalitarian partnerships.

7. Chapter VII. Conclusion

7.1. *Introduction*

Family and marriage are often perceived as normal and habitual aspects of people's lives as family life is ingrained in individuals' daily routines. It also serves to reproduce the norms of patrilineality that translate into specific residential and affiliation patterns that prioritize men's relatives. Likewise, 15 out of 32 informants have had a patrilocal experience, meaning that at some period of their marriage, they lived either close to the husbands' parents or relatives or co-resided with them. While this finding indicates that 'traditional' norms and rules remain resilient, the individual performances in similar living arrangements are found to be different and creative. Furthermore, while patrilocal residence is still regarded as the default and normative option, urban newlyweds tend to shift in their residential patterns – from living patrilocally to moving neolocally or bilocally, for instance. Further to this, three of the couples have had an experience of matrilocal co-residence, with one of the newlywed couples co-residing with the wife's parents for around five years. Moreover, while patrilocal and patrilineal norms are associated with women's subordinate positions in family hierarchy, the findings indicate that proximity to relatives can also be associated with provision of care and support, as the cooperative aspects of family life are complementary to pressures, demands, and conflicts. It is the focus on doing family that reveals how newlyweds negotiate the norms around residence and affiliation patterns, balancing between expectations and personal aspirations. There, every individual household dynamic discloses a wide variety of family practices, peculiar to specific circumstances, personalities involved and the quality of relationships between newlyweds and their respective kin.

The relationships between people, especially within family, are rarely unbound – individuals' choices and behaviors are relational and set within emotional and intimate interactions with partner and kin (Carter and Duncan 2018, 7). By means of signing the marital

contract, newlyweds bring unrelated people together and create a new volatile social web of relations, consisting of both sets of parents and relatives. Although my objective was to understand and depict women's agency in marriage and how they navigate family dynamics, it became evident that it is insufficient to examine any single social role in isolation from the broader system of familial relations and circumstantial arrangements. Family is experienced as relational commitments and new occupations, daily uncertainties, living arrangements, negotiations, situational strategizing, and challenges that require careful navigation.

Furthermore, familial relations encompass a range of interpersonal dynamics, within which individuals' choices and actions are shaped by rationality, emotions, and affection, as well as by dependence or adaptability to social expectations and traditional practices. While the dichotomy between rationality and emotion, as well as modernity and tradition, has been one of the most abiding in sociological theory, women's narratives and reflexivity challenge these binary distinctions. When asked about residence patterns, for instance, women expand their responses beyond the logistics of living arrangements to elaborate on the 'feelings of heart' and the 'gut' that are associated with their choices and experiences. Their reflections emphasize the importance of emotional attachments, while illuminating strategic negotiations – sometimes, women's narratives shed light at how emotional fulfillment and a sense of belonging override rational calculations or immediate material considerations. Kinship relations serve as a playground where 'the social', entailing traditional certainties, collective moralities, and societal expectations, is reconciled with 'the individual' or rationality of choices, emotions, and personal attachments (Carter and Duncan 2018, 181). This interplay complicates the already intricate dynamics of marital and familial relationships, making them an even more captivating subject for exploration. Therefore, the study of women's agency in marriage has extended beyond an isolated exploration of women's narratives concerning family

practices towards a more comprehensive understanding of kinship relations and diverse family practices of urban middle-class Kazakhs.

7.2. *A Study of Urban Married Women*

While family and marriage in Kazakhstan are formative institutions, there is often a reluctance to discuss family matters in details, especially with strangers – therefore, it was crucial to develop a reflexive space for women. In my research, autoethnography and the dialogic approach are instrumental methodological tools that allowed me to reflect on my own experience of being married and to engage with the narratives of other women in a relational way. Autoethnographic approach allowed to critically explore and acknowledge my research positionality as both a researcher and a participant within the social and cultural systems I studied. Dialogic interactions with informants facilitated co-construction of knowledge, interviews turned into ongoing conversations and reflections on family life, revealing the intricate and complex interplay between tradition, agency, and personal aspirations. Engaging in dialogic method assisted in uncovering how women perceive and articulate their experiences – it revealed that marriage and kinship relations are shaped by a complex interplay of love, emotions, obligations, and that 'doing' family is contingent upon structural factors, personalities, and unique arrangements. The research group consists of urban, middle-class women from Astana and Almaty who, while balancing between traditional expectations and self-fulfillment, possess distinct social and economic advantages. These women, most of whom are highly educated, employed, and in some cases, own their independent apartments, are doing family and marriage within an evolving dynamic of modern Kazakhstan. Their decision-making horizons, or the range of available options and possibilities in making choices pertaining to family life, are expected to be broader in comparison to women who may lack these resources. Education, financial competence, housing, and employment provides women with a freedom that permits them to critically and creatively engage with collective moralities,

and selectively adopt and modify traditional roles. For instance, most of the informants, at certain points in their marriages, were comfortable with performing as breadwinners while their husbands became homemakers. These roles were reflected upon, as if they are flexible and adaptable based on the needs and priorities of the family. Women's narratives exemplify that their level of independence is associated with a perceived sense of security that can be employed to challenge and negotiate familial expectations, such as gendered division of labor and the persistence of patrilocal co-residence. Importantly, even with their financial and educational backgrounds, these women also face the need to balance the demands of tradition and modernity. While their broader decision-making horizon grants them more autonomy, they must still align relational commitments, new occupations as 'wife', 'daughter-in-law', and sometimes 'mother', with individual aspirations. In these new occupations, women are expected to embody traditional norms of fulfilling the role of *kelin*, all while maintaining their personal autonomy and independence.

Although agency is usually associated with self-determined actions, assertiveness, and the capacity to act independently, it would be sociologically naïve to ignore individuals' behavioral plasticity and to assume that they perform solely on the basis of rationality. Within the context of family matters, as women's narratives suggest, individuals shape their personal lives in relation to other family members – and these interactions oftentimes reconcile rationality, emotions, and social expectations. These dimensions of family life are not isolated, instead they are mutually sustained and co-produced (Illouz and Finkelman 2009, 403). For instance, women's reflections illustrate that decisions related to living arrangements, marital dynamics, or even daily household management and roles are not only the result of logical calculations. Instead, these decisions can be influenced by emotional attachments to family members, such as the desire to maintain harmonious relations with in-laws, such as the sentimental ties between sons and their mothers, or the mental pressures of fulfilling the role of a *kelin*.

Alongside, social expectations – based on the norms of honor, duty, and respect – further influence and shape how women perform their agency. This interplay requires women to creatively balance personal aspirations and collective responsibilities before relatives, with rationality guiding decisions that are nonetheless conditioned by the need to navigate emotional and social dimensions of family life.

Likewise, women's agency reflects continuous, both conscious and unconscious, negotiations where rational calculations inform strategies, while societal expectations and norms remain as crucial in determining how women eventually perform. Following that, the ways in which urban newlyweds do family and marriage negates a strict dichotomy between rationality and emotion, modern and traditional, as agency is co-influenced and co-produced within an intricate web of relations through reinforcement of practical needs, affective and emotional ties, social obligations. In this light, doing family and performing marriage is never static nor uniform, familial relations can be characterized by fluidity, where periods of harmony can escalate into resentment, and conversely, times of mutual understanding can turn into renewed tensions. Family life, therefore, offers a freedom to choose from a range of available options - in terms of behaviors, emotional responses, or decisions related to household management and duties – people get to creatively adapt and rearrange familial practices to find the most appropriate social fit for their individual circumstances. In a volatile network of relations and changing circumstances, individuals themselves exhibit flexibility that allows them to shift between emotional impulses, such as prioritizing personal desires, and familial expectations of corresponding with societal roles that are associated with respect, adherence to hierarchical structures within the family.

7.3. *Agency and Residence Patterns*

While experiences, sentiments or rationality vary, women's narratives tend to depict the instances of 'bonded' agency (Carter and Duncan 2017). Women's decision-making, their

capacity to act and exert influence within marriage is not solely a result of their individual interests or desires, nor financial or educational backgrounds. On the contrary, women's agentive power is responsive to the relational dynamics between the nuclear family of the newlyweds and the extended kin – performance of agency also depends on the personalities involved, the degree of interdependence between family members, communication styles, responsibilities, and expectations. Agency varies from subtle, reactive performances of power such as strategic compliance, it can be performed through patience or resistance, as it can also be purposeful and strategic (Duncan and Carter 2018, 206). Highlighting women's agentive powers in relation to newlyweds' living arrangements acknowledges the rules and norms governing the interconnected network of lifelong Kazakh bonds between extended family and the newlyweds' nuclear family. In this light, residence patterns play a crucial part in determining the level of communication between newlyweds and their relatives, as well as the availability of support networks.

Therefore, it quickly became evident that co-residential living arrangements reveal a more intense level of interaction between newlyweds and their relatives, which consequently affects women's performance of agency. In contrast, neolocal living arrangements seem to disclose a reverse pattern as women who have experienced both types of living arrangements tend to highlight a marked difference. In co-residential settings, women often had to devote significant time and focus to navigating through the expectations of in-laws or their own parents, especially when demands were high. Women also shared that co-residence, while offering newlyweds financial support through pooled expenses, comes at the cost of privacy and autonomy. Upon moving to neolocal arrangements, women's attention shifted toward prioritizing the needs of their nuclear family and pursing personal aspirations – usually, because it is more manageable to negotiate with a partner, rather than to introduce changes or negotiate within the established family dynamics of older relatives. Likewise, the most visible

differences in how newlyweds, women in particular, perform in family life and marriage, emerge when contrasting co-residential arrangements with neolocal ones.

When it comes to bilocal living arrangements, the family dynamics is usually shaped by the degree of proximity, support needs, and the quality of personal relationships. Bilocality offers newlyweds a flexibility to choose with whom they will maintain closer communication and interaction, or on contrary, whom to distance themselves from to avoid replicating undesirable family dynamics or to bypass encountering unsolicited advice. This arrangement grants women greater agency in navigating familial relations and balancing between different sets of relatives – as for example, women emphasized that they prefer to leave their children in the care of their natal family or to seek help with childcare from them, either because they trust their own family more, or they wish to avoid imposing on their in-laws; sometimes, it is not a matter of preferring her relatives over her husband's relatives, but rather the availability of supportive sibling structure, particularly having multiple younger sisters or brothers, that influences a woman's decision as to where her child would spend more time.

It is often expected that certain residence patterns, such as co-residential arrangements, would limit a woman's ability to perform her agency. Nonetheless, this correlation is not always linear. While co-residential arrangements, particularly patrilocal, are associated with parental control, interference, this living arrangement offers opportunities for mitigating familial conflicts, asserting influence, and even developing opportunities to move out, despite relatives' expectations or initial agreements. Following that, co-residential living arrangements can compel women to perform strategic and purposeful agency – defined as the capacity to navigate and exert influence over their circumstances – or adapt their performance of agency depending on the specific context. Co-residential living arrangements offer prospects for negotiating living conditions and expanding individuals' decision-making horizons – when a woman is dissatisfied with her living arrangement, she often reflects in detail about how she

took deliberate steps to either change the residence or to develop strategies to adapt and continue with the marriage. Similarly, not all neolocal arrangements guarantee freedom and autonomy, as the persistence of patrilineal norms and son preference can maintain and facilitate strong emotional ties between husbands and their mothers. As women's narratives suggest, this interdependence can intrude into newlyweds' personal lives, even from a distance – it is women's reoccurring discursive pattern and a phenomenon that they often critique. Furthermore, most of the research participants shared that their residence pattern has changed, sometimes more than once.

Changes in residence patterns also reflect the evolving relationships within the nuclear family of newlyweds. Often, greater distance, that is offered by neolocal living arrangements, from intrusive relatives allows newlyweds to establish their own family dynamic that aligns with their needs and values. Urban men, for instance, tend to be more open to sharing household chores and responsibilities, which works well for the couple but may not always be approved by their relatives. In such cases, distance – whether emotional or, more often, physical – aids in mitigating potential conflicts, allowing newlyweds to focus on building their own family strategies without expending energy and resources on resolving familial tensions. However, this difference is reflected only by those women who had co-residential experience, and even among them, there are several stories that depict how distance, while mitigating physical discomfort, still does not resolve the issues stemming from one partner's emotional dependence on their parents, particularly when they remain closely tied to seeking approval and validation in relation to major life decisions and strategies.

7.4. *Traditions: Adaptability*

Aside from variations in living arrangements or any other situational factors, traditions continue to play a significant role in shaping family life. Kazakh kinship relations are informed by traditional practices that reinforce social norms and cultural moralities, such as patrilineality

and patrilocality, which in turn structure the interpersonal dynamic between different family members, reinforce cultural value placed on age and gender, determine the distribution of authority, and sometimes foster patrilocal co-residence. Patrilocality is the most frequent living arrangement, and it can be perceived as a rigid traditional practice. However, it is in fact being adapted, internalized, and performed differently across individual family systems. The adaptations and selective engagement with traditions emphasizes how traditions are not static or uniformly perceived and applied. On contrary, they are interpreted, internalized, and performed differently within each family system. By creatively engaging with traditional practices, women demonstrated how traditional certainties and roles can be both facilitated and redefined, creating a volatile and dynamic interplay between continuity and change.

In the cosmopolitan and urban centers of Astana and Almaty, traditional practices continue to endure. Patrilocal co-residence is framed within the local discourses of continuity, where the sustenance of tradition is perceived as essential to preserving family values and kinship ties. As I discussed in previous chapters, a traditional role such as that of *kelin* is embedded within broader societal and familial expectations shaped by the notions of honor (*namys*) and shame (*uyat*). This role, while being shaped by external expectations and internalized by a *kelin* herself, serves to regulate women's behavior within the family, upholding hierarchical structures. However, women's narratives suggest a more complex interplay between tradition and its practical implementation - it is not a rejection or acceptance of tradition, but rather a selective engagement and adaptation of tradition that draws from the inherent variability and adaptability of traditional practices. Aidana from Astana observed that her mother-in-law tends to emphasize traditions, or interprets them to her own advantage, which reinforce the *kelin's* obligations toward her husband's family, while disregarding practices that could have assisted Aidana in adjusting to the new family structure or navigating her new social role.

Rather than simply conforming to tradition, women and other family members tend to engage with these practices and norms, adapting, negotiating, discursively examining, and sometimes openly challenging the expectations placed upon them. For instance, the period of co-residence is often strategically utilized by newlyweds to accumulate financial resources to eventually establish their own independent household, turning what might otherwise be viewed as a restrictive tradition into an opportunity for future autonomy and independence. While patrilocal nearby living and patrilocal co-residence are most frequent, urban newlyweds sometimes opt to co-reside matrilocally if it, for example, offers more economic benefits such as pooled resources, convenience of location, or the bride's parents have a larger home, offering more comfort and space. One of the possible explanations for this pattern is that newlyweds often prioritize the economic benefits of co-residence, regardless of whose parents it would be, as young families frequently face financial challenges, especially with high apartment prices. Following that, traditional expectations that facilitate family unity through patrilocal co-residence become secondary considerations. Interestingly, when co-residence starts to intrude into the personal dynamics of the newlyweds – creating challenges such as miscommunication or unsolicited advice – newlyweds may choose to move out earlier than their financial goals were reached. Often, the suggestion to move out originates from women and is later supported by their husbands. Likewise, urban newlyweds tend to prioritize the well-being of their nuclear family over the financial stability and support offered by the pooled resources of the parental home. As women's narratives suggest, emotional well-being and personal space take precedence over financial convenience.

Most of the newlyweds in this study live or have lived in patrilocal arrangements, and they agreed that matrilocal co-residence remains infrequent and, sometimes, is stigmatized. The informant, referred to by the pseudonym Aruzhan expected that their move to matrilocal nearby residence would strain her relations with in-laws. While she enjoyed the idea of matrilocal

nearby residence because of proximity to her grandmother, Aruzhan defended spending time with her by pointing to grandmother's advanced age, framing caregiving as not only a duty but a necessity. Her caution derived from the gendered expectations placed on *kelin* in Kazakh families, where caregiving responsibilities towards natal family could potentially be viewed negatively by husband's parents. Matrilocality, according to women's narratives can be viewed as a precondition for imbalances in *kelin's* familial obligations because some in-laws tend to express concerns for the amount of time a *kelin* might spend with her natal family. It is expected that upon marriage, a woman is introduced into her husband's family to assimilate there and prioritize it as her own. However, this traditional expectation or notion lingered in the air, Aruzhan's specific matrilocal factors influenced how the tradition was adapted to fit the context. Over time, her in-laws became more supportive of this living situation. Largely due to the influential role Aruzhan's uncles played in the local community. Her uncles, well-connected and respected, provided not only a sense of security for Aruzhan but also played a pivotal role in supporting her husband's career. Her narrative discloses how her husband's ability to advance professionally with the assistance of her relatives gradually changed the in-laws' perspective on their matrilocal living arrangement. Therefore, matrilocality that is often perceived as a deviation evolved into a favorable situation or an upward professional mobility. This scenario illustrates how traditional notions, particularly matrilocality, can be reinterpreted and sometimes embraced if it aligns with visible and practical benefits.

Parental control or relatives' interference is frequently framed as mechanisms for maintaining familial order and fulfilling duties, bolstering the value of respect and responsibility. A frequently emerging discursive pattern is the close emotional and practical interdependence between sons (women's husbands) and their natal families, particularly mothers – which is framed as a demonstration of loyalty, respect, and continuity. Women who have experienced this dynamic often criticize it, admitting how it contributes to tensions within

their own marriages. While they acknowledge that this dynamic is often expected due to patrilineal norms and the cultural preference for sons, women also reflect on how it manifests differently depending on the family context and individual personalities involved. Women shared how this pattern tends to shift when newlyweds transition from patrilocal co-residence to more autonomous living arrangements – or as women gain more independence, they are able to establish boundaries trat create distance between their nuclear family and the potential interference of relatives. Importantly, some women shared that, in contrast to their in-laws, who perform as cooperators by providing support and guidance, their natal family remains distant. This detachment is often the result of strained personal relationships, particularly between the bride and her mother, due to unresolved childhood trauma. Other women reflected on their deliberate choice to keep a distance with their natal families, as they want to avoid replicating the family practices they observed growing up. Therefore, matrilocal arrangements do not naturally guarantee support or involvement from the bride's family. The degree of support and interaction is dependent on modes of communication, individuals' personalities. These findings suggest that every living arrangement is shaped by both the dynamic of interpersonal relationships and cultural norms.

Women also acknowledged that it is culturally inappropriate to disclose familial struggles to outsiders. This sense of discomfort, based on cultural norms, likely contributed to their hesitance in openly reflecting on the quandaries of their personal lives during the interviews, even when the research questions did not directly address relations with in-laws or other family members. As they narrated their experiences, many reflected on the concept of *uyat* – a profound sense of shame that discourages the public disclosure of marital and familial misunderstanding. Despite their awareness of this norm women responded in two distinct ways. On the one hand, as the interviews progressed, they gradually opened up, reflecting more deeply on their struggles and strategies of doing marriage. On the other hand, some shared

about finding the alternative outlets for reflection, such as one participant Madina, who turned to the anonymity of online platforms. There, Madina searched for validation from an audience, free from the cultural constraints of *uyat* and familial scrutiny. Her experience depicts how *uyat*, a derivative of traditional values that shapes behavior and discourages open discussion of familial issues, can be both mitigated and challenged in contemporary contexts. Bu turning to the anonymity of online space, Madina appealed to a space where the constraints of uyat were less pervasive, offering an opportunity to share and reflect on the relationship with her mother-in-law without fear of social repercussion. By doing so, Madina navigated between adhering to cultural norms of respect and seeking validation. Similarly, several other informants reflected on how their participation in this research provided them with an opportunity to engage in self-reflection, without the burden of judgement, which offered them a sense of relief through articulating personal worries they might otherwise keep private.

Kazakh kinship relations are a dynamic playground that can offer support systems, social capital, and mutual benefit, where power and authority are influenced by the quality of personal relationships and the behaviors of individual family members, making family experiences context-dependent and multifaceted. Women's narratives reveal that, regardless of kinship ties and traditional expectations, relatives from both the husband's and wife's sides can perform as cooperators or competitors, influencing the dynamics of the newlywed's household. Drawing on studies from Chinese kinship networks conducted by Gabrenya and Hwang (1996), women's stories in this research reflect a similar dynamic. While it is expected that a woman's natal family will offer her support, in many cases it is her in-laws who provide assistance, and at times, the reverse is true. The degree to which relatives influence newlyweds' key marital decisions, such as living arrangements or household management, is highly contingent on different factors specific to each family. These include the individual backgrounds, values, communication skills, and the overall degree of engagement within and between the nuclear

family of newlyweds and their extended families. For instance, in traditional Kazakh family structures, a woman's in-laws are often seen as the primary source of support and guidance because, upon marriage, a woman typically leaves her natal home to enter her husband's household, a process embedded within the patrilocal system. Likewise, a woman is expected to integrate herself into her new family, adapt to the norms and expectations of her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law, who oftentimes, becomes a key figure of influence. In-laws, particularly those from the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan, are often perceived by newlywed women as more traditional and demanding, as reflected in their narratives.

In some cases, the personality traits of in-laws, especially the mother-in-law, can either foster cooperation or create competition; or for instance, a mother-in-law's personal experience of being a new *kelin* herself may lead to stricter demands on her daughter-in-law. This creates a subtle dynamic where regional origins, traditional values, and individual personalities intersect to shape the quality of relations, and the extent of cooperation or competition within the household. While women in their narrative constructions tend to pay a considerable attention to the ways in which they adapted to their husband's family system, some women focused more on maintaining a closer relationship with the natal family. Women's natal family can also play a significant role, sometimes even more so than her in-laws, depending on the circumstances. The extent to which family members communicate and decide to invest in building and maintaining the relationships significantly shapes these dynamics and newlyweds' short-term and long-term strategizing.

7.5. *Limitations of the Study, Contributions and Recommendations for Future Research*

While this study offers insights into the interplay between residence patterns and women's performance of agency in marriage, as well as sheds light on urban newlyweds' family practices, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. These limitations include sample size, biases that derive from narrative inquiry, and my research positionality.

First, the sample size and its characteristics limit the generalizability of the findings – informants are a select group of middle-class urban Kazakh newlyweds, rather than a representative sample of the population. Therefore, the narratives of the women who took part in this study do not capture the full range of marital practices and dynamics in various contexts across Kazakhstan. Informants themselves reflected on the different privileges that they enjoy such as ownership of property, career options and the opportunities offered by the cosmopolitan centers. The experiences of women from other socio-economic backgrounds would probably differ significantly. Further research should include a broader spectrum of participants. I would also like to point out that the interviews were conducted in Russian language, the choice that reflects linguistic realities of urban newlyweds in Kazakhstan. I suggest that Kazakh language, which is more frequently spoken in rural contexts or outside of cosmopolitan centers such as Astana and Almaty, is more strongly associated with traditional practices and values – the use of Kazakh language can be tied to the preservation of cultural heritage, while Russian language often reflects a more modern and cosmopolitan identity.

Second, the study is primarily based on self-reported narratives, which may be subject to biases such as selective memory and social desirability. To mitigate the biases, I employed a dialogic and interpretative approach, and included the husbands' responses. However, the subjective nature of a narrative inquiry implies that the findings, discursive frames, and interpretative repertoires, reflect the informants' personal experiences and perceptions, rather than providing objective or universal conclusions. Furthermore, while I engaged in dialogic interactions with women, I had no direct access to their husbands and their responses remain superficial. To grasp the complexities of marital dynamics and partnership, it would have been more efficient to conduct in-depth interviews with both partners. It is worth pointing out that it was not my objective to evaluate every experience per se, but rather to explore diverse narratives and capture the complexities of women's lived experiences.

Third, in conducting this study, my positionality as a Kazakh married woman with urban, middle-class background has played a significant role in shaping both the research process and the interpretation of findings. While my insider status facilitated trust and reciprocity with research participants, it also presented potential limitations, particularly in the form of 'home blindness'. The phenomenon of 'home blindness' is referred to a situation where researchers are so embedded in the cultural and social context they study that they may overlook or take certain aspects for granted (Halstead 2001, 52). By being open with both research participants and readers, and by reflecting critically on my research positionality, and recognizing the possibility of 'home blindness', I aimed to balance empathy with critical distance, ensuring that the insights from this study are as objective and rigorous as possible given the inherent complexities of insider research. Future research could benefit from collaboration with an outsider researcher, whose distance from the cultural context may allow for different perspectives to be explored. Collaboration could help to minimize the risks of overlooking culturally embedded practices and offer a more in-depth understanding of how residence patterns and agency intersect in Kazakhstan, or how married couples adapt and reinvent traditional family practices.

This thesis makes several contributions to understanding Kazakh women's agency in marriage and urban newlyweds' family practices. While it indicates and explains the interplay between affiliation and residential patterns, it also responds to scholarship on marriage in Central Asia. This study serves to shed light at how women creatively employ different leverages, offered by patrilineality and patriarchy, to assert their interests – either by fulfilling the role of providers in a family, or mitigating misunderstanding or conflicts by leveraging the role of emotional care takers, or by skillfully utilizing support from the extended web of kinship relations, or by adapting communicative or behavioral strategies that serve to establish a functioning and peaceful household, and sometimes by introducing new practices to alter their

living arrangements. All the different narratives disclose the variety of family practices that can generally be categorized as either overt or covert – where women, irrespectively of circumstances, perform their agency, sometimes in the form of submission or silence, by asserting their interests during pre-marital negotiations, rearranging relational responsibilities in response to external pressures, or by delivering ultimatums and suggesting divorce. What is more important, within the scope of this research, women's reflections on their decisions and actions are regarded as their ways of fashioning their family lives, which in turn highlight that every decision and action entails agency. Agency, therefore, can be codified into specific roles, feelings and perceptions, practices that boil down to the *act of doing*. This approach stands contrary to a ubiquitous orientalization of Central Asian women. In different circumstances a woman might appeal to various strategies, depending on what has the best social fit at a particular moment.

Kudaibergenova (2018), sometimes others, promoted representation of *kelins* as universally powerless and obedient, which limits our understanding of family life to domestic violence, bride kidnappings and the discourse on shame, and women who serve men's' sexual needs and perform free labor – a satirical image that is insufficient to describe all Kazakh women's experiences in marriage. The narrative proposed by Kudaibergenova (2018, 383) emphasizes labor relationship, constrained by the familial domain, or a 'complete sacrifice for the happiness of her family'. According to the author, this rhetoric reflects a 'popular discourse' around 'the typical set of expectations for the ideal *kelin*' that has been circulating in contemporary Kazakh society (Kudaibergenova 2018, 385). Werner (2009, 316), expanding on these narratives delves into forced abductions suggesting that these 'have become increasingly common since the fall of the Soviet Union', feeding upon the traditions of arranged marriages.

Another group of scholars, on contrary, highlight that marriage does not have a specific content or implications, particularly in candid reflections of women who recount daily

interactions (Ismailbekova 2015; Cleuziou and McBrien 2021; Montgomery 2022). The deconstruction of the rhetoric of a powerless *kelin* and the problem of 'saving her' is also depicted by Bissenova (2023) in her *'The Construct of the 'Oriental Woman' and the Problem of 'saving her' in the Colonial, Soviet and New Liberal Discourses. In Kazakhstan: The Labyrinth of the Postcolonial Discourse*. These works suggest that structural oppression is not synonymous with traditional practices and that the notion of Kazakh married women cannot be used interchangeably with a slave or a free labor. *Kelins*, certainly occupy a weaker position in comparison to older women in family and are regarded as 'outsiders', yet they can indeed maneuver and craft space for their interests and authority (McBrien 2021, 340). Women's respectability and authority is responsive to a woman's individual personality and a capacity to navigate kinship relations and engage in daily bargaining, if necessary, over household activities or strategic planning. The outcomes and process of doing family depends on women's capacity to engage in 'bargaining with patriarchy', make use of the existing 'rules of the game' and her willingness to internalize the norms of a family system to which she was introduced (Kandiyoti 1988). The rhetoric around a powerless *kelin* derives from a 'tradition', either from 'old' traditional or 'contemporary traditional' (Kudaibergenova 2018). It is unlikely that one would accurately trace the origins of 'traditions', as these are constantly changed and reimagined by individuals privately besides close doors and publicly through a discursive scrutiny. In this study, one of the women, for instance, highlighted that her mother-in-law prefers 'traditions' that demand from *kelin*, while disregarding practices that would facilitate *kelin*'s integration into the family. However, even if the interlocutor did not feel comfortable with her mother-in-law's oversight, she employed communicative strategies to convince her husband that they need to change their residence by physically distancing from parents-in-law. This highlights that if traditions might seem binding, the perceptions and responses to expectations and demands differ. Thus, among newlyweds who co-resided with in-laws, as

'traditions' necessitate, those who did not want to comply or did not manage to assert firm boundaries, have eventually moved-out – and this finding indicates that the practice of moving away from patrilocality forms a pattern. Interestingly, in some cases, physical distance facilitated improvement of relationships between *kelins* and their mother-in-law.

According to Ismailbekova (2015), women can draw from the tools offered by patriarchy to ascend in their status. Thus, as one of the examples that supports Ismailbekova's (2015) claims, urban women use their patrilocal co-residence as means to accumulate funds. Furthermore, while co-residing with their husbands' parents, and sharing expenses, some women rely on the support of their family of origin – thus, young married women manage to make use of the cooperative aspect of Kazakh family life. Importantly, while Ismailbekova (2015) focuses on rural women, this study delves into the lives of urban women, who arguably have more resources and leverages to use and maneuver – with more resources at hand, women perform their social roles with more flexibility and creativity. It is worth pointing out that relationship dynamic among family members, or actors, is not static, thus some of the interlocutors suggested how at the onset of their marriage, they experienced feelings of alienation as they were not accustomed to their husbands' family norms and rules. However, with time and experience, time-intensive investments in relationships, either with parents-in-law or husbands, their position or status was modified from being 'an outsider' to becoming 'part of a family'. Furthermore, women's individual narratives show that there is a discrepancy between what is expected of them and how they perform on the daily basis, implying that knowing what the cultural concept of *kelin* is does not necessarily translate into implementation. Likewise, according to women's narratives, they might feel pressured and misunderstood, yet they also have resources, either financial or emotional, to navigate their way out of the arrangements that do not work – either through change in residence, communicating with mothers-in-law through

their husbands to avoid overt conflicts, or by suggesting divorce as a regulatory or preventive measure.

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research can be suggested. First, expanding the scope to include women from diverse geographical areas within Kazakhstan – particularly rural regions – would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how residence patterns or other circumstantial arrangements influence marital dynamics across different contexts. This would also help to explore how economic, geographic, and educational factors intersect with cultural norms to shape women's agency in marriage. Comparison between urban and rural married couples could also provide insights into how individuals perform family and marriage in different contexts, and diverse social and economic circumstances of each setting. For instance, while urban newlyweds face economic pressures, or employment demands and high housing prices, rural newlyweds may depend upon family-based economies or traditional agriculture. Additionally, future studies could employ a longitudinal approach, studying newlywed couples over time to observe how co-residence patterns and women's agency evolve throughout the different stages of marriage, and what strategies do women adapt to assert influence in their family systems. This would provide a dynamic perspective on how pre-marital negotiations, such as residence arrangements, have long-term effects on marital satisfaction, gender roles, and autonomy. It could also help to understand the impact of modernization on family norms and practices.

Further research could also benefit from investigating emotional labor or how women manage their own feelings and the emotional needs of family members – while I touched upon the issues of invisible labor, the deeper understanding would shed light at how women do indeed mediate day-to-day negotiations, and what overt strategies of 'doing' family do they indeed employ. Future research could also conduct a comparative analysis of emotional labor across different living arrangements – this could shed light at what residence patterns lead to

significant emotional labor, or what other circumstantial arrangements offer more autonomy. Lastly, future research could also conduct a comparative study across other Central Asian countries to examine how residence patterns and family dynamics play out in different political, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

7.6. *Chapter Summary*

By using women's agency as a tool for analysis, my goal was to discover the variety of urban family practices and marital relations, depending on newlyweds' residence patterns. Interviews with women allowed to grasp the complexities of marital decision-making, managing relationships with their partners and extended kin, and striving to balance personal aspirations with familial obligations. Regardless of the specific circumstances in which they find themselves – feeling content or dissatisfied with the dynamics of their marriage – these women consistently offered detailed reflective accounts of the strategies and actions they employed to assert their interests. Their narratives revealed agency as both choices and actions that are performed within the boundaries of tradition and societal expectations and as intentional and assertive acts in which women negotiate between fulfilling familial obligations and pursuing their self-defined projects. In the familial context, agency is not exercised in isolation but rather is performed within the intricate web of relationships and ties with other family members.

Women's performances of agency are highly contingent upon specific contexts, manifesting in a spectrum of subtle, covert, or overt actions. These actions might take the form of indirect influence, leveraging the role of an emotional caretaker, where compliance and conformity serve as strategic tools for managing familial relations – whether through manipulation or keeping a composed demeanor. However, alongside these covert performances of agency, countering the conventional expectations of deference, women also engage in assertive forms of agency. This assertiveness is evident when women openly challenge decisions made by their

partners or relatives, deliver ultimatums, or use the word divorce as a rhetorical move to advance interests or exhibit control – particularly in circumstances where women possess an independent apartment, and are supported by their natal family. In such cases, women tend to be more inclined to perform assertive forms of agency and engage in overt bargaining, drawing confidence from the security offered by an alternative living arrangement.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that not all women, even those with comparable financial autonomy, education, or support networks, respond to quandaries of marital life uniformly. As discussed in the first chapter, decision-making within the familial sphere reconciles rational, calculative thinking with emotional dimension that is equally critical. Women's actions in marriage are often shaped by emotional attachments and affective bonds, which may lead them to make choices that are not self-serving when viewed from a purely rational approach. This emotional entanglement within family relations exposes that agency is never entirely independent nor individualistic. On contrary, agency in marriage in inherently intertwined with the complex affective ties between partners themselves, and with extended family members, that shape and, sometimes, constrain women's decision-making horizon.

None of the interviewed couples intended to stay in co-residential arrangements indefinitely, as they prioritize establishing an independent family unit, free from the direct influence of their relatives. While matrilocal co-residence is less common, one of the interviewed women shared her experience of matrilocal co-residence for five years. She described it as both strategic and comfortable, suggesting that under certain conditions, matrilocal co-residence can be just as beneficial as patrilocal co-residence. Interestingly, women's narratives reveal that regardless of whether the co-residence is patrilocal or matrilocal, such arrangements tend to foster conflicts between newlyweds', or one of the partners, and parents. Findings suggest that co-residence intensifies daily interactions, which can lead to tensions over financial decisions, household management, and boundaries between newlyweds and extended family. Women's

stories suggest that while co-residence provides opportunities for support and shared spendings, this arrangement also heightens the potential for competition, misunderstandings and facilitates issues of privacy – the proximity to the husband's or wife's family may blur the boundaries between the couple's autonomy and familial influence, fostering the environment where conflicts are more likely to arise.

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9. Appendices

1. Questionnaire for women:

Part I (a)

a) Pre-marriage agency:
1. I said 'yes' to a marriage proposal, because I…
2. I thought that he is going to be a good husband, because…
3. There are some things that I knew I wanted/expected from marriage…
4. My parent (s) reaction/response to a marriage proposal…
5. His parent (s) reaction/response to a marriage proposal…

Part I (b)

b) In-marriage agency:
1. Please, identify your living arrangements:
a) We live near (or with) my parents (relatives) – matrilocal
b) We live near (or with) his parents (relatives) – patrilocal
c) We live far from both sets of parents – neolocal
d) We live near both sets of parents – bilocal

2. We decided on our living arrangements, because:
a) I work in this city
b) My husband works in this city
c) Our parents provided us with this apartment/house:
My parents …
His parents …
d) Your own option:

3. Since I got married, I decided to continue to work/study/volunteer, because…
Since I got married, I decided not to continue to work/study/volunteer, because…

4. Let us say that your family budget is 100%, then how much do you and your husband contribute to it:
a) 50/50 me and my husband
b) I contribute more than my husband
c) My husband contributes more than me
d) My parents (relatives) contribute more than his parents (relatives)
e) His parents (relatives) contribute more than mine

5. I do contribute substantially in household decision-making by doing…

6. When deciding upon minor/major household purchases, I:
a) Rely on my savings/salary/wage
b) Rely on my husband's savings/salary/wage
c) Our parents (relatives) help us
d) You own option: …

7. When deciding upon leisure time with your husband, you often end up doing:
a) What you want (identify what)

b) What he wants (identify what)
c) You spend leisure time separately
d) Your own option: …

8. Who decides on whether/when to have children:
a) I decide on my own
b) My husband decides
c) We decide collectively
d) Your own option: …

9. Women are the primary decision-makers at home (please, identify the area/areas)
a) Budgeting
b) Laundry
c) Cleaning
d) Cooking
e) Making small household purchases
f) Making major household purchases

10. Men are the primary decision-makers at home (please, identify the area/areas)
a) Budgeting
b) Laundry
c) Cleaning
d) Cooking
e) Making small household purchases
f) Making major household purchases

11. When making important decisions about family life, household decision-making, planning, we do it together with my husband

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

12. When making important decisions about family life, household decision-making, planning, we do it by consulting my parents (relatives, friends)

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

13. When making important decisions about family life, household decision-making, planning, we do it by consulting his parents (relatives, friends)

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

2. Interview questions for women:

I. Pre-marital arrangements

1. Please, indicate your age
2. Level of education and work experience
3. Place or region of residence
4. Place and region of your birth
5. Where do you live today and for how long?
6. How and when did you meet your future husband?
7. For how long did you know each other before you became a couple?
8. Who proposed to become a couple?
9. For how long have you been dating?
10. Did you anticipate the proposal?
11. Did your parents know about the proposal, or did you tell them post factum?
12. Did you communicate the ways in which you would have liked the proposal to happen?
13. Tell me a little more about the proposal: was it a meaningful location, did he get down on his knee, did you like the proposal ring – was it the one you have expected?
14. For how long have you been 'engaged'?
15. Did you and your future husband have pre-marital agreements, expectations of each other: budgeting, place of residence, number of children, leisure, distribution of monthly family income, important household purchases?
16. What did you expect from marriage and your partner?
17. What did your husband expect from marriage and you as a wife?
18. Do you think that you managed to stick to 'oaths', arrangements, and pre-marriage agreements?

II. In marriage decision-making

1. For how long have you been married?
2. Where do your and your husband's parents live?
3. If parents do not live near, then how often and whom do you visit? With your husband or alone?
4. Do you have siblings (brothers or sisters)?
5. Why did you decide to live in Astana/Almaty?
6. Do you plan on moving, where and why?
7. Do you work, study or volunteer?
8. How does it correlate with your married life?
9. How much time do you dedicate to work, studying or volunteering compared to household responsibilities?
10. Do you have a housemaid or what do you think about getting a help with cleaning and cooking?
11. Do you take part in distributing or allocating your family's monthly income and how?
12. Who makes major household purchases?
13. Who is responsible for grocery shopping?
14. How do you spend weekends with your husband, and without?
15. Who do you visit more often: your or his parents, relatives and friends? (for the last 6 months)
16. Who comprises your friend group: your or his friends?
17. Do you travel alone abroad, or across Kazakhstan?
18. Do you plan children and what does affect your decision?
19. If you already have children, then how the responsibilities are shared between you and your husband, relatives or friends?

20. How do you think your living arrangements affect your decision-making in your family?

21. Do you think that matrilocality would have given more 'agency freedom'?

22. Speaking generally, what is the relationship between newlyweds' living arrangements and women's decision-making?

3. Questionnaire for men (women's husbands): to control for husbands' opinion on their wives' responses

Part I (a)

a) Pre-marriage agency:
1. She said 'yes' to a marriage proposal, because…
2. I thought that she is going to be a good wife, because…
3. There are some things that I knew I wanted/expected from marriage…
4. My parent (s) reaction/response to a marriage proposal…
5. Her parent (s) reaction/response to a marriage proposal…

Part I (b)

b) In marriage agency:
1. Please, identify your living arrangements:
a) We live near (or with) my parents (relatives) – matrilocal
b) We live near (or with) his parents (relatives) – patrilocal
c) We live far from both sets of parents – neolocal
d) We live near both sets of parents – bilocal

2. We decided on our living arrangements, because:
a) I work in this city
b) My husband works in this city
c) Our parents provided us with this apartment/house:
My parents …
His parents …
d) Your own option:

3. Since we got married, she decided to continue to work/study/volunteer, because…
Since we got married, she decided not to continue to work/study/volunteer, because

4. Let us say that your family budget is 100%, then how much do you and your husband contribute to it:
a)50/50 me and my husband
c) I contribute more than my husband
d) My husband contributes more than me
e) My parents (relatives) contribute more than his parents (relatives)
f) His parents (relatives) contribute more than mine

5. I do contribute substantially in household decision-making by doing…

6. When deciding upon minor/major household purchases, I:
a) Rely on my savings/salary/wage
b) Rely on my wife's savings/salary/wage
c) Our parents (relatives) help us
d) You own option: …

7. When deciding upon leisure time with your husband, you often end up doing:
a) What you want (identify what)
b) What she wants (identify what)
c) You spend leisure time separately
d) Your own option: …

8. Who decides on whether/when to have children:
a) I decide on my own
b) My wife decides
c) We decide collectively
d) Your own option: …

9. Women are the primary decision-makers at home (please, identify the area/areas)
a) Budgeting
b) Laundry
c) Cleaning
d) Cooking
e) Making small household purchases
f) Making major household purchases

10. How do you think your living arrangements affect your decision-making in your family?

11. Do you think that matrilocality would have given women more 'agency freedom'?

12. Speaking generally, what is the relationship between newlyweds' living arrangements and women's decision-making?

4. Survey for men (women's husbands): to control for husbands' opinion on their wives' responses

Part II

1. My wife decides on minor/major household purchases

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

2. I decide on minor/major household purchases

Strongly Agree

Agree
Disagree

3. My wife decides on our leisure activities

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

4. I decide on our leisure activities

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

5. We spend more time with my parents (relatives, friends)

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

6. We spend more time with her parents (relatives, friends)

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

7. I decided on our living arrangements

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

8. She decided on our living arrangements

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

9. When making important decisions about family life, household decision-making, planning, we do it together with my wife

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree

10. When making important decisions about family life, household decision-making, planning, we do it by consulting my parents (relatives, friends)

Strongly Agree

Agree
Disagree

11. When making important decisions about family life, household decision-making, planning, we do it by consulting her parents (relatives, friends)

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree