

## KAZAKHSTAN YOUTH: DECLARED FAMILY VALUES AND REAL BEHAVIOUR

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**Abstract:** In Kazakhstan, the number of studies on the values of youth has been growing in recent years. Most of them demonstrate a predominance of family values. Meanwhile, the country has a disturbing number of divorces, most of which fall on young families. In the following article, the authors attempt to find an explanation for the existing gap between declared values and actual behavior. For this purpose, the authors analyzed existing sociological studies related to youth. The authors conclude that people's responses in surveys may reflect cultural norms and, therefore, reproduce "ideal" behavior. What respondents claim in surveys can often differ from their true beliefs and views.

**Keywords:** *youth, family values, divorce, sociological research*

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## ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ ЖАСТАР: ОТБАСЫЛЫҚ ҚҰНДЫЛЫҚТАР МЕН ШЫНАЙЫ МІНЕЗ-ҚҰЛЫҚ

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**Аңдатпа.** Қазақстанда соңғы жылдары жастардың құндылықтары туралы зерттеулердің саны артып келеді. Олардың көпшілігі отбасылық құндылықтардың басымдығын көрсетеді. Ал, елімізде ажырасулар саны алаңдатарлық, оның басым бөлігі жас отбасылар арасында. Мақалада авторлар жарияланған құндылықтар мен нақты мінез-құлық арасындағы бар алшақтықты түсіндіруге тырысады. Осы мақсатта авторлар жастарға қатысты бар әлеуметтанулық зерттеулерге талдау жасады. Авторлар адамдардың сауалнамаға берген жауаптары мәдени нормаларды көрсетуі мүмкін, сондықтан «идеалды» мінез-құлықты жаңғыртуы мүмкін деген қорытындыға келеді. Сауалнамаларда респонденттердің айтқандары көбінесе олардың шынайы сенімдері мен көзқарастарынан өзгеше болуы ықтимал.

**Түйінді сөздер:** жастар, отбасылық құндылықтар, ажырасу, әлеуметтанулық зерттеу.

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## МОЛОДЕЖЬ КАЗАХСТАНА: ДЕКЛАРИРУЕМЫЕ СЕМЕЙНЫЕ ЦЕННОСТИ И РЕАЛЬНОЕ ПОВЕДЕНИЕ

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**Аннотация.** В Казахстане в последние годы растет количество исследований, посвященных ценностям молодежи. Большинство из них демонстрируют преобладание семейных ценностей. Между тем, в стране наблюдается тревожное количество разводов, большинство из которых приходится на молодые семьи. В статье авторы пытаются найти объяснение существующему разрыву между декларируемыми ценностями и реальным поведением. С этой целью авторы проанализировали существующие социологические исследования, связанные с молодежью. Авторы приходят к выводу, что ответы людей в опросах могут отражать культурные нормы и, следовательно, воспроизводить «идеальное» поведение. То, что респонденты утверждают в опросах, часто может отличаться от их истинных убеждений и взглядов.

**Ключевые слова:** молодежь, семейные ценности, развод, социологическое исследование.

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## Introduction

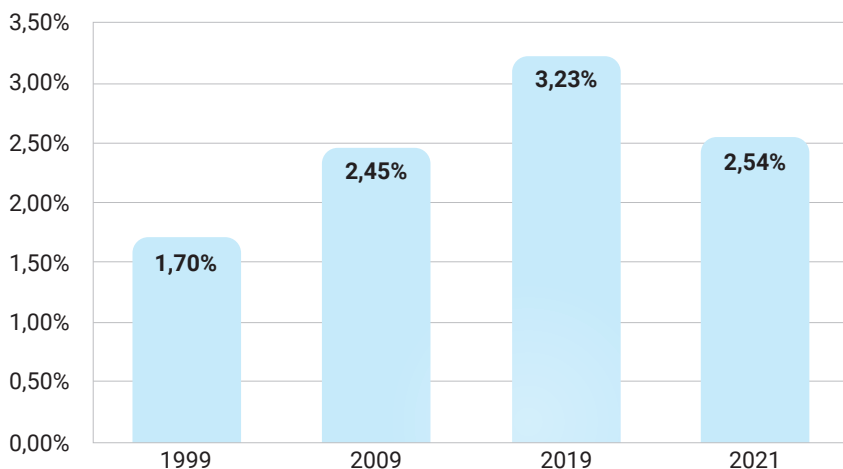
What are modern scholars say about Kazakhstani youth in terms of values? Foreign and local social scientists unanimously claim that the young generation is traditional and place family values on the top of their value hierarchy. For instance, famous social scientist Laruelle (2019) wrote, «The Nazarbayev Generation is quite conformist in its life goals: it believes in family values, marriage, having children, healthy living, and material comfort.» [1, p. 195]. Local experts indicate that Kazakhstani youth do not differ from their age mate from other countries. They value human rights, democracy, equality, good education, and security to some degree. But our youth differently sees life values and has another attitude toward family. The experts characterize them as leaning toward traditional attitudes such as family, marriage, and children [2].

Sociological findings in recent years have demonstrated practically one picture of values on a population level and among youth and young adults. Thus, the survey results by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2020 showed that traditional family institution is sustainable, both among adults and among young people [2]. In that connection, integral parts of modern Kazakh society are intergenerational continuity, respect for elders and women, marriage, and family values [3]. In fact, young people get married in great numbers; only in 2017, 7.9 marriages were registered per 1000 inhabitants, which is higher than in most OECD countries [4]. In line with a 2020 survey, 73.1% of respondents indicated that they consider family to be the meaning of their lives. Unsurprisingly, the result is skewed toward females; 75.1% chose this option, whereas only half of the males had the same opinion [5]. However, the situation with the divorce rate in the country is disturbing.

As seen in Figure 1, starting from 2019, the divorce rate has a downtrend. The researchers pointed out that tough economic challenges, combined with the uncertainty created by Covid-19, impacted on separation rate causing critical reduction [4].

Remarkably, the separation rate among young couples does not perfectly fit into the paradigm of society with traditional family values. The age range between 25 and 29 is responsible for the country's most significant number of union dissolutions [6]. The considerable numbers of all splits occur during the first decade of marriage (61.5%), and the first four years of family life constitute a third of all divorces [7]. The findings from two waves of the World Values Survey (6 and 7 waves) showed that most Kazakhstanis view divorce primarily in a negative light, considering it unacceptable. Throughout the waves, attitude indicators toward divorce remained their value. The average constituted 4.8 and 4.7, respectively. Compared with other countries, this indicator is considered average; the highest is Denmark - 8.7%, and the lowest among Central Asia countries is Kyrgyzstan - 2.2% [8].

**Figure 1.** Total divorce rate per 1000 people in Kazakhstan [9]



At the same time, a similar story is told by survey results exploring young people's attitudes toward divorce. The "Youth" Center 2018 demonstrated that the prevailing number of young adults viewed separation as an adverse event (76.6%). Among them, almost every second respondent stated about highly negative attitude, especially if a family with children. Meanwhile, 17.2% of participants indicated that divorce is inevitable in the case of an unhappy marriage. The main reasons for marital splits were financial and housing problems, marital infidelity, bad habits (alcoholism, smoking, gambling), and parental interference between young spouses [10].

The KISD survey [11] demonstrated a slightly different picture, which explored all Kazakhstani adults. Most participants (88.3%) gave a downbeat assessment to divorce. However, splitting this majority into two groups revealed some interesting insights. The first group considered divorce utterly unacceptable in any case (43.2%), and the second group held a negative assessment but believed that divorce is better than constant conflict (45.1%). It is noteworthy that the respondents provided different reasons for divorce compared to the previous study. Most respondents named "domestic violence" the main factor responsible for union dissolution (43.2%). "Alcoholism" (39.7%) and "cheating" (35.85%) took the second place in reasoning, while "parental interference" was indicated the last (4.4%) [7]. Important to point out that recent data analysis on World Values Survey Wave 7 and empirical data from focus groups did not find evidence that extramarital affairs are driven by ICT (information and communication technologies) consumption. Even if instant messaging tools lower divorce costs and expand opportunities for finding new mates, Muslim Kazakhs did not show interest in extramarital affairs that could lead to divorce [4].

Another perspective showed a survey conducted by the Institute of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Kazakhstan and the Center for Support of

Civil Initiatives in 2020. They identified that “intervention of relatives” was the leading cause of splits (61%). Among other reasons were named “permissiveness” (41%), “crisis in family values” (36%), “selfishness” (28%), “social networks influence” (28%), and “simple divorce procedures” (25%). Important to mention that some of these options did not include in the list of studies discussed earlier [11]. Nevertheless, these findings are mixed; they clearly state that regardless that Kazakhstanis view divorce negatively, at the same time, separation is seen as an option to end unhappy marriages. Besides, based on survey results on the general population, Uskembayeva M., etc. [12] concluded that women’s emancipation could explain an increasing number of divorces. Modern women are increasingly reluctant to tolerate unequal relationships in marriage, violence, and spousal irresponsibility. Furthermore, their economic status is not always less than that of men. The following notion is partially supported by Dall’Agnola and Thibault [4], who revealed that Muslim Kazakhs more often initiate divorce than men.

Considering these results as a fundamental driver of the divorce initiative is difficult since the findings are confusing. In most cases, survey participants responded to these questions based on their observations, and even though some respondents had an actual divorce experience, the results were not arranged by this. In addition, an issue of question formulation was raised by Dall’Agnola and Thibault (2021) [4]. They argue that question-wording as “What reason can justify divorce?” asks about not actual causes of divorce but refers to “idealized justifications” of separation in the eyes of the respondent [4]. Besides, a significant variation in divorce reasons from survey to survey might be partially explained by an incomplete list of possible divorce motives. Each survey had its reasons list, and sometimes that lists were not and significantly differed in the first place.

Family dissolution is not only one indicator of ongoing processes in the family institution but is the most illustrative. The divorce rate among young spouses indicates that family and family values have been undergoing fundamental transformations. Even if most people see divorce as an adverse event, careful examination of survey results shows that divorce is acceptable if it is caused by “idealized justifications.”

Taking into consideration the current state of thought among foreign and local scientists that family values are deep-seated in society and the current high divorce rate, we attempt to find answers to the following research questions: “Why is there a gap between declared family values and actual marital behavior? What are the reasons for these discrepancies?”. Therefore, below we examine surveys representative of the country level and where youth and young adults are the main research subjects.

In the following paper, we approached to find an explanation for the existing gap in family values and marital behavior.

### **Methodological approach and explored surveys**

The following article is based on the Desk Research method, which refers to collecting information from open sources. To address posed research questions, we analyzed the survey findings carried out by government institutions and international organizations. Since our subject of interest is Kazakhstani youth, we examined only studies where youth and young people are research subjects. To analyze these studies, we applied the comparative method.

### **Social surveys review**

In Kazakhstan, young people have been under the scope of research for the last decade. Among the first attempts to comprehend youth in various domains is an annual national report produced by Scientific Research Center «Youth». Within these reports, the authors cover crucial statistical indicators and enlarge them with mass research findings on the main aspects of young adult's life, including exploring their system of values. Although surveys show that family values are fundamental to young people, the marriage rate has fallen over the last decade. Since 2011 it has decreased from 57.87% to 52.13% among women and from 48.86% to 41.78% among men. As for the values of young people, over the past five years, the value rating of young people in Kazakhstan has been stable and unchanged [13].

In 2020 «Youth» Center conducted a survey, where data was collected by quantitative method via face-to-face mode, covering respondents between 14 to 28 years old. The sample size comprised 2000 young respondents. Additionally, the qualitative approach was implemented to deepen and broaden understanding (expert focus group method). The survey showed that for most people, the ultimate value was family (85.2%); health and friendship accounted for 51.8% and 28.3%, respectively [14]. As in the previous year, the fundamental value for the prevailing number of young people was named family (82.3%), health (45.6%), and friendship (23.1%) [15].

In 2014 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung initiated a survey across the country adopting the research methodology used in the study Shell Youth Study. To meet country conditions and particularities, the methodology underwent adaptation. To achieve the research goals, they applied quantitative (a survey of young people through personal interviews) and qualitative (focus groups and in-depth interviews) research methods. The survey covered 1,000 respondents aged 14 to 29, exploring extensive topics, including interests, plans, dreams, values, attitudes, and opinions. The survey results showed that family institutions and marriage are important for young people, and most see marriage as an essential part of their future adult life. 82.5% of them imagine themselves as married with a family, and 9.4% as living with a partner (and a family). Only 1.5% identify themselves as singles and 0.9% as singles but with one or more children. Remarkably, there was no drastic difference in responses among rural and urban dwellers. Thus 88.7% of rural inhabitants see themselves as married with a family, compared to 77.6% of urban residents [16]. However, more young urban residents (13.4%) would consider cohabitation compared to rural dwellers (4.3%). According to Karmenova Z. [17], this phenomenon could be

explained in terms of the ruralization process that takes place in the cities. It implies that today rural migrants mainly influence cities' marital and reproductive behavior, but not vice versa. Moreover, it should be noted that there is regional heterogeneity in the divorce rate. Separation is more common in urban and northern regions, while the southern part of the country shows an inverse trend [18].

Another perspective on family values predisposition is views about optimal marriage age. The average age considered appropriate for getting married is 22 for women and 25 for men. In the 17-23 years old category, females showed more willingness to get married and start a family compared to males of the same age. Regarding children, a large proportion (37.1%) would like to have two children, 28.1% saying about three kids and 19% about four. Less than 1% do not want any children. Studies show that some young people hold traditional views about family institution. But it is evident that young people's views on the family are changing. Many youths have more modern pictures of how gender roles are distributed within the family. For instance, males and females are responsible for different social functions but have equal rights; women are free and autonomous, independent from men. Perhaps these views were influenced by the increase in economically self-reliant women in this country [16].

In 2020, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung performed an extensive representative survey among youth and young adults, covering 1,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 29. To address survey goals, quantitative and qualitative (focus group) data collection methods were employed. Several modes were applied as the COVID-19 wave hit the country (in person, by phone, and online). By the results, the majority (64.6%) perceive marriage as a critical decision to make, and merely for 8% of respondents, it means nothing. Moreover, 86.1% of all the participants favor having a family with children. Most respondents believe that the optimum marriage age for women and men is 25. When asked how many children they would like to have in the future, most young people think of two (31%) or three (29.3%) children. Significantly fewer respondents would like to have four children (12.3%) or more (15.7%) [2].

Based on research findings by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2014 and 2020, young Kazakhstanis are predisposed toward family and mostly envision themselves as married parents of two or three children.

Unfortunately, in the the «Youth» Center studies, questions related to family values, attitudes, marital behavior, etc. are not a part of the study.

## Discussion

As seen from studies mentioned above, young adults are indeed traditional; most envision themselves as married and with family. However, these findings do not fully explain ongoing processes and do not reflect profound transformations of marriage institutions related to religious dynamics, migration patterns, and the impact of globalization [17]. Moreover, this research is contradicted by statistical records of divorce rate, an increasing number of cohabitation and children born out-of-wedlock, etc.

We suggest that people's responses in surveys might be a reflection of cultural norms and, therefore, picture "ideal" behavior indicators. Dall'Agnoia and Thibault (2021) concluded that what participants claim in social surveys, and specifically in focus-group discussions, frequently differ from their genuine beliefs and attitudes, leading to biased responses toward normative beliefs [4].

In most surveys described above, the primary data collection approach was the quantitative method, implemented in face-to-face mode. Besides, among additional tools were focus groups (qualitative method). We suppose that the research modes like face-to-face and focus groups might be the source of culturally or socially desirable responses, thus causing bias. It has already been established that desirable responding is one of the significant causes of response bias and poses a severe threat to the validity of findings. This type of bias means that the respondent answers in the most positive way to save their face and maintain social approval [18]. This bias is frequently observed in collectivistic societies, which is the case in Kazakhstan. Research findings suggest that collectivism prevails over individualism in our society [19].

Face-to-face and focus-group modes are supposed to the presence of a specially trained interviewer, and the focus group discussion includes other participants. Both modes may suffer from similar biases and issues but to a different extent. One such instance is sensitive questions. Sensitive questions can vary from culture to culture and from person to person. The sensitive question is considered in the case when a respondent thinks that a particular question has socially desirable answers while some other answers are socially undesirable. The socially undesirable responses might be the respondent's attitude or behavior violating certain norms in the given society. As a result of this violation, a respondent may refuse to respond or give an untruthful answer when the truth is considered socially unwanted [20].

In this regard, an interesting experiment was conducted in Japan to explore the impact of other respondents' answers on individual responses in survey studies. They implemented four different conditions varying in the direction and the level of social pressure. The findings have verified that social desirability bias greatly influences individual answers. Participants were seven times more likely to choose socially unacceptable answers if most previous respondents also chose the same option [21].

In the Kazakhstani context, intimate questions regarding marital status and reproductive plans are not considered deeply personal. Conversely, these types of questions are normalized and might be posed by strangers. The older generation is always prepared to give a good lecture about family values and place social pressure on single people and childless couples. But this "normality" could lead to situations where young adults are unwilling to reveal their actual values and attitudes to escape apprehension and social condemnation. It is helpful to say that respecting older adults is deeply embedded into the culture. As it could be seen, interviewer characteristics such as gender, age, and language might predispose respondents to give socially appropriate responses. It was found that the interviewer's presence

during data collection is a pressuring factor that forces participants to provide more socially acceptable answers [21].

In a focus-group setting, social desirability bias is more pronounced. This issue was also raised by Dall'Agola & Thibault (2021), who pointed out that decision on the sizes of focus groups was primarily driven by the fact that often a few vocal individuals belonging to the older generations dominated during the discussion session but also sometimes even condemned younger people by which impacted on their answers. "Particularly while discussing how traditions and cultural practices of Kazakhs may change through their exposure to Western culture on social media, Kazakh youth either chose to agree with the view voiced by older interview participants or to remain silent and not answer the question at all. Thus, younger participants often felt too intimidated to share sensitive personal ideas with a larger group of people." [4].

Continuing the subject of survey mode, we discovered a study conducted among Kazak youth (17-25 years old) living in the East-Kazakhstan region. Data collection was carried out in 2020 during the Covid-19 wave. In those circumstances, Internet opportunities were applied; a web survey of 500 respondents and five online focus groups was conducted. The results suggested that study participants showed a transitional state of family values. From their perspective, family is primarily valued as a source of emotional support and a way to escape loneliness. The idea to end the marriage if it failed was not rejected, but it even found support. Most consider the family as a union of equal partners. Even though the reproductive function of the family institute is still significant for these participants, in the rank of the meanings and family values, it was placed in third place. For the most significant number of young Kazakhs, reproduction plans include 2-3 children. Education and being economically independent were named as necessary and obligatory conditions for beginning family life. Many young Kazakhs living in urban areas (especially females) perceive the family as a union of equal partners, which contradicts traditional attitudes [22].

The following study does not differ drastically from the studies described above. Still, it reveals some fascinating insight that youth change their marital behavior by postponing marriage, showing an acceptable attitude toward divorce; the essential condition for marriage is receiving education and gaining economic independence. The following study was conducted on a regional level. It could not be entirely transferred to the whole country since the region has its peculiarities in ethnical structure, language, etc.

In addition, some methodological weaknesses are present. Thus, addressing value orientation among young people with only one question does not provide a complete picture of values and reliable results. Besides, the question wording does not provide any specification regarding the type of family, which leads to ambiguity in the question understanding of «What is the most valuable in your life?», (question from "Youth Center" questionnaire. For instance, some respondents could realize their parent family, while others imply their own (current or prospective) family.

We argue that studying values is challenging and requires a deep understanding of ongoing processes, especially among youth, one of the most dynamic categories. Values, by their nature, could be influenced by various factors, among them religion, social media, political discourse, etc., which should be considered while designing the study methodology.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

In the following paper, we attempted to find an explanation for the existing gap between declared family values in surveys and contradictions by divorcees. In this regard, we examined the survey findings carried out by government institutions and international organizations. Since our subject of interest is Kazakhstani youth, we reviewed studies written by the “Youth” Center and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. According to “Youth” Center, young people’s values have not changed over the past five years; for the majority of them, family is the most valued. Findings by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung show that Kazakhstanis are predisposed toward family and mostly envision themselves as married parents of two or three children.

After carefully examining methodological approaches applied within the studies, we concluded that social desirability bias could partially explain the discrepancy between declared values and actual behavior. It is difficult to say to which extent this type of bias is spread in our cultural context. Therefore, future studies addressing sensitive topics should take into account this type of bias.

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