



# Does reform in Kazakhstan improve access to childcare? Evidence from nationally-representative surveys



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## ABSTRACT

During Soviet era, Kazakhstan enjoyed universal free-of-charge access to childcare. After the commencement of economic and political transition, and the achievement of independence in 1991, attendance in childcare programs dropped significantly. This reduction in attendance was accompanied by a growing gap in access caused by wealth, language, mother's education, and regional disparities. Responding to the reduction in attendance as well as growing inequalities with respect to attendance, the government of Kazakhstan initiated a bold program of reforms aimed at improving access to childcare. This paper represents an initial assessment of the success of these reforms using a unique set of nationally-representative surveys. We found that, in general, the reform was successful in increasing childcare attendance. However, the results of the reform fell short of their target. However, the reform significantly reduced the role of household wealth as a barrier to attendance. Nevertheless, the wealth of a household remains an important determinant of attendance. Additionally, although the reform successfully mitigated gaps in attendance which were based on language spoken and education of mother, regional disparities remain significant.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess the reforms whose aim has been to improve access to childcare in Kazakhstan. Like other former Soviet Union republics, Kazakhstan enjoyed universal free-of-charge access to childcare (Habibov, 2012a, 2012b; Lokshin, 2004). After the commencement of economic and political transition and independence, which was achieved in 1991, the inherited childcare system suffered from severe under funding, leading to a considerable drop in childcare attendance (Anderson & Heyneman, 2005; Habibov, 2010a, 2010b; Stewart & Huerta, 2009; UNESCO, 2004). Furthermore, during the initial period of transition, the drop in attendance did not occur evenly. Significant gaps in attendance surfaced based on family income and residence, as well as language spoken in the family and the education level of the mother (Anderson, Pomfret, & Usseinova, 2004; Giddings, Meurs, & Temesgen, 2007).

Responding to the reduction and growing inequalities in attendance, the government of Kazakhstan initiated a bold program of reform (UNESCO, 2004, 2005). The program set up a specific numeric targets for increased childcare attendance. It predicted that 70% of the Kazakhstan children would attend childcare by 2010. It also envisaged significant reductions in the existing inequalities in childcare attendance. To achieve the above-mentioned goals, the program initiated a comprehensive set of measures, including an improved accountability

on the part of the regional administration, for developing and maintaining childcare facilities, a significant increase in the number of newly build facilities, various tax breaks, the expansion of childcare in the Kazakh language, and financial support for low-income families.

The information about the reforms is still very limited. Hence, this paper represents an initial assessment of the success of the reforms using a unique series of high-quality nationally-representative surveys. The first survey was conducted in 2005 at the inception of the reforms. This survey provides us with a baseline, or a snapshot of the situation as the reforms were beginning to take place. The second survey was conducted in 2011, by the time the targets of the reforms should have been achieved. Consequently, the specific research questions which are addressed by this paper are:

- (1) How did childcare attendance change after the reforms?
- (2) How did the determinants of childcare attendance change after the reforms?

Answering the above-mentioned questions has both theoretical and practical significance. From a practical standpoint, the findings of this paper will help policy-makers, social administrators, and international donors understand and evaluate the successes and pitfalls of the reforms. The finding of this paper will also help with impending decision-making about the future course of the reforms. It must also be highlighted that in addition to the reforms aimed at improving access to childcare which have already been put in place in Kazakhstan, similar reforms are also currently being planned in the neighbouring countries

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of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2007; Government of Tajikistan, 2010; Government of Uzbekistan, 2008). Therefore, the findings of this paper will allow neighbouring countries to learn from Kazakhstan's experience in reforming childcare. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings of this paper contribute to a better understanding of the over-time variation in childcare attendance and its determinants in transitional countries.

## 2. Context

### 2.1. Soviet era

During the Soviet Union era, the development of childcare in Kazakhstan followed a unified all-union model. This model had three explicit objectives (Habibov, 2012a). The first objective was to provide universal services for children and their families in order to reduce existing income, educational, and regional inequalities. The second objective was to facilitate the increase in women's participation in the labour market for economic reasons, and to improve the status of women in family and society. The third objective was to enhance the psychosocial and cognitive development of children through early childhood education. These objectives were achieved through a two-leg childcare system, where the first leg consisted of state-run childcare facilities which were fully funded by the state budget, and the second leg consisted of enterprise-run facilities funded by large enterprises and collective farms.

In the last years of the Soviet Union, access to childcare in Central Asia was as high as in the countries of Eastern Europe (Giddings et al., 2007). Moreover, by 1991, Kazakhstan enjoyed the highest level of preschool access among all the countries of Soviet Central Asia (Penn, 2004). This emphasis on childcare access was hardly surprising given Kazakhstan's view on children (UNESCO, 2004). In Kazakhstan a child is considered to be a gift, and families with children are regarded as lucky. Utmost importance and respect are given for the opportunity of raising a child, and this is particularly true with respect to teaching children in their earliest years. The great Kazakh humanist and philosopher Abai Kunanbaev stressed that children have two needs to be satisfied: to eat and sleep, and to learn.

Indeed, the Soviet era childcare system stressed mutuality and citizenship through the high-quality universal delivery of service (Penn, 2004). It must be noted however that as it followed the all-union model, the childcare system in Kazakhstan during the Soviet era was highly-centralized, rigid, and teacher-oriented. Despite this, it achieved significant success in mitigating existing social disparities such as income, education, regional variations, and it allowed a significant number of women to join and excel within labour market (Lokshin, 2004; Stewart & Huerta, 2009).

### 2.2. Early transition

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, accompanied by the transition from an administrative-command economy to a market economy prolonged economic recession, and political instability, and thus negatively affected the childcare system. Both legs of childcare system inherited from the Soviet era were badly shaken (Habibov, 2012b). The state-run enterprises and collective farms were transformed to private businesses and farms, which then halted their support to childcare facilities. These profit-focused enterprises did not consider it appropriate to spend precious financial resources on supporting a social infrastructure which they saw as being the responsibility of the state. Furthermore, newly-emerged enterprises and farmers often did not have sufficient funds to fund childcare facilities. At the same time during transition, the drastic reduction in state revenue severely diminished the ability of the state to support a childcare system. As a result, childcare attendance plummeted. At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, about 50% of children attended childcare in

Kazakhstan (Penn, 2004). In 1998, the share of children attending childcare dropped to just 11%.

Furthermore, the plummeting attendance in childcare was not evenly distributed among the different groups in society. In fact, the collapse of the former childcare system in the period of early transition led to a dramatic increase in inequalities in access to childcare. Evidence available from Kazakhstan and neighbouring transitional countries suggests several main reasons for the growing disparities in access to childcare.

During the early days of transition, the disparity in childcare access between wealthier and poorer households grew considerably. The lack of public and business funding for childcare during transition led to the skyrocketing of both official and unofficial out-of-pocket fees for access. As a result, household wealth emerged as a strong determinant of attendance inasmuch as children from the wealthier households became the most likely to attend childcare (Habibov, 2012a, 2012b).

A considerable disparity in access to childcare existed between children from Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking households (UNESCO, 2005). During the Soviet era, Kazakhstan's elite tried to get Russian-speaking education for their children since Russian was the official language of the Soviet Union. Without mastery of the Russian language, one could not receive a high-ranking position in Kazakhstan. Thus, most of the childcare facilities of the time had Russian as the language of instruction. Russian speaking children from native Russian families and Russians-speaking native-Kazakh elite were at an advantage because they also communicated Russian at home. On the contrary, Kazakh-speaking and other native language speaking families did not send their kids to childcare because childcare was in Russian and not their own languages. Therefore, children from Russian-speaking households had a higher likelihood of childcare attendance.

The disparity in attendance was also explained by education (Giddings et al., 2007; Mertaugh, 2004). Mothers with higher educational levels could be more aware of the benefits of early childhood education. They could also have a better understanding of how deregulated childcare works in terms of rules, regulation, fees, and availability. As a result, this may have been another reason that children with mothers with higher educational levels had a higher likelihood of attending childcare.

Regional disparity became noticeable during the early phases of transition (UNESCO, 2004). The former centralized system of childcare had been abolished since independence. However, no mechanism through which to match regional needs with financial resources for childcare was developed in its stead. Regional governments hold different attitudes towards childcare. A disparity has been noted between the amounts of resources different regional governments provide to childcare. Furthermore, there is noticeable inequality with respect to the resources available to regional governments. Typically, the Astana region, which includes the capital Astana, and the Almaty region, which includes the former capital and the largest city of the country, have access to greater resources for childcare. At the same time, the demand for childcare is much higher in the Astana and Almaty regions. As a result, attendance greatly fluctuates between capital cities and regions, and between the regions.

### 2.3. Reforms

Against this background, the government of Kazakhstan initiated reforms aimed at addressing unequal access to childcare. The reforms commenced in 2004 and consisted of several steps (UNESCO, 2004). In early 2004, the government instructed heads of regional governments that they must personally take the responsibility for restoring the network of childcare facilities across their regions. Where possible, mostly in urban areas, new childcare facilities were to be built. In rural areas with relatively small densities of population, and where the construction of new facilities was unfeasible, childcare classes were to be organized on existing school premises.

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