GLOBAL HUMAN
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Azerbaijani Women: From Soviet Influence to Post-Independence Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Azerbaijan, previously one of the fifteen republics under the Soviet Union, attained independence following the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. After declaring independence, Azerbaijan joined the United Nations in 1992. The population of Azerbaijan is predominantly Muslim, with 95 percent adhering to Islam. *Shi'a* Muslims makes up the largest sect (Heyat, 2008).

Azerbaijan offers a unique case for examining the interaction of religion, colonialism, state socialism, nationalism, and ethnicity in shaping women's status and gender norms. Positioned geopolitically between the East and West, Azerbaijan exemplifies the diversity of women's experiences in the Muslim world, challenging common Western stereotypes (Tohidi, 1996).

Under Soviet rule, Azerbaijan was influenced by socialist ideologies that promoted an official doctrine of egalitarianism (Najafizadeh & Mennerick, 2003). Despite the persistence of patriarchal norms within society and family, women in Soviet Azerbaijan were granted equal rights in education, employment, healthcare, and legal matters. The government encouraged women's participation in political and social spheres, instituting quotas to ensure women's representation at all governmental levels. However, men continued to dominate the majority of government and administrative positions, holding over 60 percent of these roles (Tohidi, 1996, 1997). Even with these policies to foster gender equality, women encountered numerous challenges and contradictions due to entrenched cultural traditions and mentalities (Tohidi, 1996). In addition to their professional responsibilities, women also bore the primary burden of household chores and childcare, leading to a dual workload.

When asked about the impact of the Soviet system on women in Azerbaijani society, many Azerbaijani women highlight the high levels of education and the abandonment of the veil as significant achievements of the Soviet era. For Muslim women in the Soviet Union, the widespread unveiling that took place in the 1920s and early 1930s was a symbolic gesture of liberation and a practical step that enabled their participation in public and social life, which was regarded as essential for achieving equality (Nfa, 2002).

Muslim women in Soviet Azerbaijan attained a significant degree of emancipation, especially when compared to women in other Muslim societies. They made substantial progress in education, employment, primary health care, and legal rights concerning family and personal status. However, they continued to face dilemmas, contradictions, and dualities in terms of their overall freedom and liberation (Tohidi, 1996).

The concept of womanhood in Soviet Azerbaijan was partly shaped in opposition to the image of Russian womanhood. Since Azerbaijan was fully annexed by Tsarist Russia in the early 19th century, the interplay of modernity and traditionalism in gender roles, along with other social aspects, has been influenced by the distinction between the Muslim Azeri

("us") and non-Muslim Russian/Soviet ("them") (Tohidi, 1996). This duality highlighted the cultural and religious differences between the predominantly Muslim Azerbaijani society and the largely secular Russian influence, emphasising the need to preserve Azeri identity amid external pressures.

The emancipatory progress of Azeri women is particularly evident when compared to their pre-Soviet status and to the situation of women in other Muslim countries like Iran and Turkey. Universal education and female literacy, which reached 99.9 percent (compared to 70 percent in Turkey and 42 percent in Iran among 15-24-year-olds) (UNDP, 1994, p. 144), and the significant educational attainment of women (46 percent of highly and semi-specialised professionals), are notable achievements of Muslim women in Soviet Azerbaijan. In health care, despite environmental damage, especially in the Soviet East, the level of primary health care and overall health status of the population were comparable to those in developed countries by the late 1980s. Although occupational segregation by gender existed as in other countries, women in Azerbaijan made up about 43 percent of the workforce in the national economy (compared to 31 percent in Turkey and 10 percent in Iran) (UNDP, 1994, p. 162).

Since Azerbaijan declared independence on August 30th, 1991, the gendered identity formation has continued with greater intensity and variety in the nation's post-Soviet rebuilding process. Gender-related issues and representations are now integral to the ideological landscape where national identity, cultural authenticity, and independence are debated, especially in the context of ongoing interethnic conflicts (Tohidi, 1996).

1. Azerbaijani Women During the Soviet Era

1.1. Women and Islam

In Azerbaijan, the Soviet Revolution linked women's liberation with efforts to distance from Islam and traditional customs, while embracing European influences and styles. Concurrently, under Stalin's authoritarian rule, religious practices were relegated to the private sphere, creating a dual system of socialisation and education: religious instruction at home and atheistic teachings in schools. This led to the first generation of post-revolutionary Soviet Azeris experiencing a significant heart-mind divide, forming a key component of the parallel codes of thought and behaviour that characterised Soviet society (Nfa, 2002).

With the establishment of the Soviet state, the male-dominated *Shari'a* (Islamic law) was replaced by a civil family code that safeguarded women's rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody. Despite these legal changes, family norms and structures have remained conservative and patriarchal (Tohidi, 1996).

It's important to recognise that Islam, like other major religions, is a multifaceted institution. Beyond its spiritual beliefs and rituals, it encompasses a complex array of cultural, psychological, and social traditions, attitudes, and customs that shape an entire way of life (Olcott, 1990). One can argue that the Soviet regime's anti-religious campaigns may have succeeded in suppressing the intellectual and ideological aspects of Islam. However, the experiential, consequential, and ritualistic dimensions of Islam, broadly understood as a Muslim way of life, have maintained their vitality (Tohidi, 1996). Examples include rituals such as male circumcision (*Sunnat Bairami*), sex-segregated mourning ceremonies, and traditions ensuring a bride's virginity on the wedding night *(yengeh)* (Tohidi, 1996).

In the modern Middle Eastern context, there has been resistance to "Westernisation" through further publicisation, politicisation, and ideologisation of Islam (Soroush, 1994). In the atheistic Soviet context, however, where overt displays of religion were repressed, people resorted to a domesticated and largely covert ritualistic Islam as a means of resisting total Russification (Tohidi, 1996). As a result, by turning the private or domestic sphere into a key area of resistance in the Muslim Soviet East, traditional and religious characteristics have continued to dominate gender roles and intrafamily dynamics. Consequently, women have become the primary bearers of this "religious load" (Tett, 1994).

1.2. Women in Education

The focus on industry (especially heavy industry), women's education, and the mass consumption of "culture" were integral to the development pattern of Soviet society and its women. The initial step on this path to progress was achieving widespread literacy, an unparalleled endeavour globally. For the Socialist leaders, literacy was the cornerstone upon which a socialist world could be constructed. It was both an objective in itself and a means for cultural revolution, socialist propaganda, and bolstering support for the Soviet regime. In the Soviet periphery, including Azerbaijan, illiteracy rates were higher than in Russia, especially among Muslim women, with illiteracy rates around 95 percent in urban areas and 99 percent in rural regions. Therefore, even more resources and determination were necessary to bring literacy to these areas, particularly for women (Nfa, 2002).

In 1925, after Soviet power was consolidated across Azerbaijan, a teachers' conference set new educational goals to expand its class base, spread communist values, and create new workers' schools and stronger ties to villages (Altstadt, 1992). That same year, the Society for the Abolition of Illiteracy was established, headquartered in Baku. According to Tamila Musayeva, a prominent historian of the early Soviet period, City-Countryside Solidarity Societies had been founded a year earlier to channel urban resources to villages through voluntary contributions from urban workers, many of whom had rural origins (Nfa, 2002).

Furthermore, the higher desirability of education for girls partly stemmed from the prestige system in Soviet Azerbaijan, which emphasised individual cultural development. Well-educated mothers deemed capable of raising cultured (*madani*) children. Additionally, it provided the opportunity for white-collar jobs in professions that allowed more time and energy to be spent at home with the family (Nfa, 2002).

1.3. The Zhenotdel and Women's Clubs

The women's department, known as Zhenotdel, of the Azerbaijan Communist Party was established shortly after the Bolsheviks took control of Baku in 1920. Its mission included creating branches at the district level, opening women's clubs, initiating literacy courses, training cadres to work with women, and promoting political literacy among women. The largely illiterate and housebound Azeri women were encouraged to step out of their traditional roles, and contribute to building a modern society based on socialist principles (Nfa, 2002).

For example, the Ali Bayramov Club provided vocational training in various fields such as telephone operating, accounting, nursing, midwifery, sewing, and weaving, alongside basic literacy courses. Women who excelled in these literacy courses were offered jobs in provincial clubs designed to educate, train, politicise, and enlighten local women (Sultanova, 1964). By the early 1930s, the number of such clubs had grown to 103. Moreover, some courses and workshops organised by the club evolved into state institutions. In 1928, the sewing workshop became the Ali Bayramov Textile Factory, and the midwifery course was transformed into the Baku School of Midwifery under the Commissariat of Health. To further their goal of enlightening and politicising women, the clubs also organised plays and musical events featuring women performers. Theatre emerged as a significant tool for Soviet propaganda in Azerbaijan, with frequent performances highlighting women's new societal roles (Nfa, 2002).

Moreover, the entire editorial team of the journal *Sharg Gadini* was composed solely of Azeri women. It focused primarily on women from working-class and peasant backgrounds while maintaining an "internationalist" perspective. This included regular coverage of women's issues not only within other Soviet republics but also in Europe. The journal played a crucial role in publicising new Soviet government laws and decrees concerning women. Each issue typically included a section dedicated to legal information and advice for women, as well as brief reports from across the country highlighting instances where men, often associated with the Party and Komsomol, mistreated women. These violations of the new laws ranged from practices like polygamy and the marriage of underage girls to cases of domestic violence and instances where women were prevented from removing their veils, attending literacy classes, or joining collective farms. Until the early 1930s, the journal served as a publication of the Azeri Zhenotdel, reflecting its socialist-feminist perspective (Nfa, 2002).

In 1930, under Stalin's rule, the Zhenotdel and its regional branches were disbanded. The official stance was that the goal of rallying women to the revolution and socialism had been achieved, and welfare, education, or job training tasks could now be managed by appropriate government departments (Nfa, 2002).

Even after the Zhenotdel's closure, the Ali Bayramov Club continued its operations until 1937, expanding its cultural programs to include sports, artistic, and leisure activities. Over time, the Club became synonymous with women's liberation (*gadin azadlighi*) and the rejection of Islamic restrictions on women, such as veiling. Through its social and cultural activities, the Club aimed to "open women's eyes" to modern ideas and lifestyles based on notions of modernity (*muasirlik*) and progress (*ilarlamak*) (Nfa, 2002).

1.4. Women in Family

In 1921, Baku hosted the inaugural Eastern Women's Congress, which called for an end to child marriages and polygamy (Sultanova, 1964). The new Soviet Azerbaijan's 1921 constitution, specifically Article 79, guaranteed equal rights for both genders. The following year, Baku was also the venue for the Congress of Transcaucasian Women, representing 40,000 women involved with Zhenotdels across the Caucasus. From 1923, the legal age for marriage was set at 16 for girls and 18 for boys. The practice of temporary marriage (*sighe*) and polygamy were outlawed, and women were granted the right to divorce and custody of their children. Starting in 1926, women workers' committees, modeled after those in Russia, were established in workshops and factories to enforce these laws, ensuring no early marriages, polygamy, or domestic violence occurred (Nfa, 2002).

Revolutionary ideas about communal living and free love spread among students and factory workers, with some women accusing men of exploiting these new freedoms for sexual relationships, leaving the women to handle the aftermath alone. Early in the revolution, radical Bolsheviks saw the breakdown of the family as a step toward true communism, believing that socialising domestic tasks would free women from household chores and dismantle the traditional patriarchal family structure, which they viewed as a bourgeois relic (Nfa, 2002).

However, by the mid-1920s, it became evident that the state lacked the resources and commitment to create communal institutions and services to replace family functions. As a result, stable monogamous marriages and functional family life were seen as stabilising forces in society and essential for a productive workforce. Thus, the 1926 family code recognised the importance of the family, ensuring child support and alimony, revising inheritance laws, and allowing housewives to claim property accumulated during marriage, which acknowledged the value of domestic work (Clements, 1985).

Urban Azeri women, according to official statistics, spent three hours a day on housework during weekdays and seven hours on weekends, alongside their employment. They were also expected to participate in civic and political activities, but this public involvement did not change the unequal domestic responsibilities, which remained largely the women's burden (Nfa, 2002).

Despite public roles, strong gender divisions in domestic labour persisted in Soviet Azerbaijan. Culturally, femininity was linked with domestic duties, while masculinity was associated with the avoidance of such chores, with men engaging in housework being derogatorily labeled as effeminate (aghabaji). Tasks like washing clothes and dishes were strictly viewed as women's work (Nfa, 2002). Research on Azerbaijani family conflicts highlighted the division of household roles, particularly child-rearing duties, as a major source of tension (Allahverdiyeva, 1994).

To manage their dual responsibilities, Azeri women relied on family support, especially from the extended family, a tradition maintained under the Soviet system. During the Soviet era, hiring domestic help was complicated by communist ideology, which opposed employing others for domestic tasks. Those who could afford help often disguised it as hosting relatives or acquaintances in exchange for assistance. This arrangement was particularly suitable for young people seeking education or vocational training in Baku (Nfa, 2002).

Moreover, attendance at nurseries (*yasli*), which cared for children from two months to three years, was linked to social status. The elite preferred hiring help or relying on female relatives over sending children to *yasli*, viewing such institutions as impersonal because child-rearing and the mother-child relationship were central to Azeri family life and kinship systems (Nfa, 2002).

The issue of the "double burden" or "Superwoman" (Corrin, 1992) is not unique to Soviet Azerbaijan or even the former Soviet Union. What stands out in the Soviet context is the persistence of gender inequalities and sexist practices under a socialist state that professed equality and vowed to address the Woman Question. In the Soviet Union, but more pronounced in the Muslim regions, the state's focus on production and the economic aspects of the Woman Question led to a significant influx of women into the workforce. However, this shift was not accompanied by the necessary social and cultural changes to family structures and gender roles. For example, inadequate child care and kindergartens made it difficult to restructure patriarchal and extended family systems. Azerbaijan was particularly affected, with its childcare and preschool education services (16 percent to 18 percent) being among the poorest in the former Soviet Union, compared to 71 percent in Russia (Tohidi, 1996).

1.5. Women in the Labour Force

The Soviet Union consistently recorded the highest female employment rates for many years. For Azeri women, as for other Soviet women, the "double burden" of external employment and primary responsibility for domestic chores resulted in significant hardship. This was further aggravated by consumer goods shortages, limited retail services, underdeveloped support services, and a lack of labour-saving devices (Nfa, 2002).

By 1985, 46 percent of Azerbaijan's highly and semi-skilled professionals and 27 percent of candidates and doctors of science were women. However, women generally occupied lower-ranking positions even in female-dominated fields. For instance, although women made up 65.3 percent of schoolteachers in 1989, they represented less than 14 percent of school principals. In the medical sector, women accounted for 58 percent of doctors, but most surgeons were men. In academia, women were only 9 percent of professors and 4.6 percent of full members of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences (Nfa, 2002).

A rarely discussed issue is whether corruption and the informal economy impacted women's prospects for attaining high managerial and executive roles. Many Azeri women professionals acknowledge that men often struggle to accept female bosses due to societal norms associating public authority with masculinity. Despite the state's official promotion of gender equality, paying significant bribes to secure high positions is generally not an option for women, as they do not view themselves as primary breadwinners. This responsibility, termed "earning bread" (*chorak gazanmakh*), is seen as the husband's duty. Moreover, women's personal networks, focused more on family and neighbours, limit their opportunities for making influential connections. The male-dominated nature of the corrupt system further hinders women's career advancement in professional fields (Nfa, 2002).

In addition, while women held political positions, they rarely held significant power within the Communist Party. Additionally, discussions about women's issues and gender equality were not allowed. Occupational segregation and pay disparities by gender were evident. Despite this, on the surface, the laws seemed to treat women fairly in the Newly Independent States (United States Agency for International Development, 1994).

A general rule reflecting women's status compared to men is the phenomenon called the **"70 percent parity"**. Under communism, women earned about 70 percent of what men earned and held around 30 percent of the deputy seats in governing Soviets before Gorbachev.Women also managed approximately 70 percent of household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, budgeting, and childcare, despite being expected to work full-time. During economic transitions, pensioners and the unemployed suffered the most, with women making up about 70 percent of both groups (United States Agency for International Development, 1994).

2. Azerbaijani Women in the Post-Soviet Transition

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has undergone significant social, political, and economic transformations. The shift towards democracy, privatisation, and a free-market economy has opened up numerous opportunities for Azerbaijan, including global economic integration. However, this transition has also introduced new challenges, particularly affecting women. The situation has been exacerbated by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia, which has led to substantial human and economic losses: approximately 20,000 Azeri deaths, nearly one million refugees, and internally displaced persons, loss of about 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory, and economic damages estimated at $53.5 billion (Najafizadeh, 2003).

The move towards privatisation and a market economy in the 1990s resulted in the closure of numerous Soviet-era factories, leading to increased unemployment, with many factories yet to be replaced by private sector industries. This privatisation also ended free state-provided healthcare and led to the restructuring of the healthcare and education systems, resulting in reduced state caregiving services, and higher unemployment in sectors where women were the predominant workforce (Najafizadeh, 2003).

During the Soviet era, high-quality education was standard, but the transition to a market economy has negatively affected both school attendance and educational quality. The education system has faced inadequate funding for teacher salaries and school maintenance. As funding for education has decreased, parents in low-income families have become more selective, often prioritising boys over girls for formal schooling (Najafizadeh, 2003). Moreover, underage or early marriages, which had been discouraged throughout the 20th century, began to be seen as a financial survival tactic for some economically disadvantaged families, resulting in numerous young women losing the opportunity to pursue education (Fábián et al., 2021).

The constitution of Azerbaijan grants men and women "equal rights and freedoms," but employment and caregiving roles remain highly gendered. Women have been particularly disadvantaged by post-Soviet privatisation and economic changes. For instance, Ibrahimbekova (2000) observed that "privatisation has taken on a male 'image,' with men owning 90 percent of businesses." Additionally, women's participation in high-paying jobs and political decision-making has significantly declined. In the industrial and service sectors, women earn only 53 percent of what men earn and hold just 12 percent of parliamentary seats, compared to 39 percent during the Soviet era (Sabi, 1999; UNDP, 2000).

Moreover, the closure of Soviet factories has led to increased unemployment for both women and men who previously had full-time, permanent jobs in the formal sector. While men often remain unemployed for extended periods, women tend to seek income in the informal economy. In some cases, unemployed men leave their families to seek work in other regions of Azerbaijan or abroad, leaving women to manage both caregiving and breadwinning duties at home (Najafizadeh, 2003).

As a signatory of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Azerbaijan's government has officially acknowledged gender equality in public life as an international objective (Gureyeva, 2011). Nonetheless, domestic policies in Azerbaijan have consistently adopted protectionist stances that distinguish women from men based on assumed biological and social differences, justifying their need for government protection. According to Gureyeva (2011), these policies perpetuate the unequal treatment of men and women under the guise of safeguarding women's "special nature". These protectionist policies give the illusion of gender progress while operating within a traditional patriarchal framework that views women's primary role as being centered around children and family (Habibov et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the transition has significantly impacted women's caregiving roles. The elimination of state services such as daycare and kindergartens has increased the caregiving demands on working women. The end of state medical services and the lack of resources have placed the burden of medical care on women, who often care for family members at home using traditional remedies. Similarly, reductions in state-funded pensions for the elderly have necessitated family caregiving, typically by female members, for elderly parents and grandparents (Abdulvahabova, 2000; Arnould, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Azerbaijan's journey from a Soviet republic to an independent nation presents a complex and nuanced narrative, particularly concerning women's status and gender norms. Under Soviet rule, Azerbaijani women experienced significant advancements in education, healthcare, and legal rights, albeit within a framework that still upheld patriarchal traditions and dualities. The Soviet regime's egalitarian policies granted women unprecedented opportunities in education and employment, which contributed to their social emancipation and professional development. However, the persistence of traditional gender roles meant that women continued to shoulder a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities.

The Soviet efforts to modernise Azerbaijani society included promoting women's liberation by distancing from Islamic traditions and customs, often by relegating religious practices to the private sphere. Despite the suppression of overt religious expressions, Islam's cultural and social dimensions remained resilient, continuing to influence gender roles and family dynamics. Soviet policies aimed at integrating women into the workforce and public life faced significant challenges due to deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and the dual burden of professional and domestic duties that women had to manage.

Post-independence, Azerbaijan's transition to a market economy and its integration into the global economic system have brought both opportunities and setbacks for women. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the economic restructuring of the 1990s led to widespread unemployment and the erosion of state-provided services, disproportionately affecting women. The privatisation process favoured men, who came to dominate new business ownership and high-paying jobs, while women often turned to the informal economy or took on additional caregiving responsibilities as state support systems dwindled. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality and Azerbaijan's commitment to international conventions like the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, gender disparities persist.

In conclusion, the experience of Azerbaijani women highlights the intersection of socialism, nationalism, and Islam in shaping gender norms and women's status. While Soviet policies facilitated significant progress in women's education and professional involvement, they were insufficient to dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures. The post-Soviet transition has introduced new challenges, reinforcing the need for comprehensive policies that genuinely address gender inequalities and support women's roles in both public and private spheres. To build on past achievements and ensure equitable progress, Azerbaijan must continue to evolve its legal and social frameworks, fostering an environment where women can thrive as equal participants in all aspects of society.

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