

# Outnumbered Azerbaijani Women in Managerial Jobs: Secondary Data and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine the existing position of Azerbaijani women regarding managerial jobs in the spheres of education and public sector, as well as individual experiences and perspectives of a group of Azerbaijani women related to this. Drawing upon secondary data analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), the research seeks to explore how Azerbaijani women are positioned statistically with regards to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and public sector, how a group of Azerbaijani women in the fields of education and public sector reflect on their individual case and relevant trends in the country; to what extent they relate their situation to external influences such as access to quality education, organizational stereotypes and discrimination, family restrictions and women's internal inclinations sourcing from cultural predisposition. Based on the study results, this paper argues that women's existing internal limitations due to cultural norms and expectations do not seem to allow research participants to see or set career as one of their primary striving and advancing points in life. Accordingly, it significantly leads to the underrepresentation of women in managerial jobs in education and the public sector.

**Keywords:** women, management, work, education, public sector

## Introduction

*'Naila from Baku, Azerbaijan was always one of the brightest students both at school and university. Having been admitted to one of the most prestigious local universities with a high SSAC<sup>1</sup> score to pursue her bachelor's degree, she was studying well ahead of her other student peers. She graduated with a diploma of distinction (called a "red diploma" in Azerbaijan) and decided to further her education with a master's*

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<sup>1</sup> State Student Admission Committee (Now: State Examination Centre)

*degree. A similar success accompanied her in her master's studies. While studying, she worked as an administrator at one of the country's local highly ranked lyceums. She got engaged and married within the second year of her master's degree studies. Interestingly, however, her education and career path seemed to cease after she got married. Following the marriage, she resigned from her job and showed no interest in seeking any job opportunities; she explained it by saying, "my primary duty of being a mother and a wife," and preferred to spend her time with her family instead of working and excelling in career.' (author's observation)*

The question of women being outnumbered in various managerial ranks is not new to academia. Women in managerial jobs worldwide, though with some variance in proportion and regardless of being from an oriental or occidental culture, seem to experience this (Buddhapriya & Khandelwal, 1995). With this regard, Azerbaijan can be viewed as an interesting case since it is a country having had contrasting influences throughout its history, with a considerable impact on the formulation of its culture and mentality towards women (Heyat, 2002; Tohidi, 1998). To be more precise, throughout history, there were Turkic-Islamic influences on the one hand and Soviet-Russian and other western trends on the other. Heyat (2002) names the contemporary culture of the Azerbaijani people as "a multi-layered hybrid of Soviet, Muslim, Azeri, Iranian and Turkic influences" (p.2). Accordingly, all of this had a significant impact on the lifestyle of and attitude towards contemporary Azerbaijani women, i.e., Azerbaijani women in the first three decades of the country's independence (from here on referred to as contemporary Azerbaijani women or Azerbaijani women). To illustrate, an Azerbaijani woman is traditionally perceived and tends to act as a submissive caretaker of the family, and a woman's active sex life or any sexual activity whatsoever is, by and large, frowned upon is rooted mainly in the Islamic values of the society. On the contrary, women in contemporary Azerbaijan can be viewed as possessing a certain emancipation level because they are represented in the country's social and economic life and are relatively free in terms of clothing, and are generally encouraged to be educated by their families.

It should be highlighted that Azerbaijan can pride itself on being the first country in the East to grant women the right to vote. However, it is usually described as a place where women tend to enjoy equal opportunities mainly on paper or, in other words, mostly in a formal manner (Heyat, 2002; Heyat, 2007; Silova & Magno, 2004; Tohidi, 1997; Tohidi, 1998), is limited by the existing laws and other governmental documents of the country guaranteeing equality (e.g., Azerbaijan's Constitution of 1995 with Amendments through 2009, art. 12; Order of President of Azerbaijan Republic, 2008). In turn, this situation has certain implications for the working women of the country, i.e., there are specific claims about unequal grounds for

establishing a successful career or not being promoted over men to managerial jobs (Wallwork, 2012).

As Lorber and Farrell (1991) argue, gender is continually created and re-created in human societies. Consequently, based on this constant process of creation and recreation, it is generally asserted that in most societies, each gender has been generally assigned a particular role or responsibility in terms of family, work, sex, and day-to-day communications since the beginning of human history; this implies that humans have socio-culturally constructed gender roles. In some traditional societies, these roles seem to be persisting to this day, particularly in non-traditional, particularly western ones, they are almost blurred (*ibid.*). Hofstede and Minkov (2010) note that historical transformations of a society play a key role in this role assignment. Throughout centuries, varying historical transitions in the socio-economic and political life of Azerbaijan have been central in constructing contemporary gendered cultural approaches of the society. In addition to significant historical events, particularly those since the beginning of the 20th century, the influence of Islamic traditions cannot be underestimated in depicting current paradoxical and ambiguous patterns in the daily responsibilities of Azerbaijani women as well as negative tendencies of their underrepresentation in managerial jobs (Heyat 2002; Tohidi 1998).

In literature, three critical historical stages playing the most crucial part in the formulation of contemporary gender relations, with this regard, are generally categorized as the Pre-Soviet Period, including the Russian Empire roughly between 1813 and 1917 as well as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic existing between 1918-1920, the Soviet Period between 1920-1991, and the Post-Soviet contemporary period after 1991 (Heyat 2002; Tohidi 1998; Tohidi 1997). It is generally argued that towards the beginning of the second stage, women's emancipation was initiated, before which strict dominance of Islamic traditions imposing certain restrictions on women's socio-economic and political life could be observed. However, historical facts reveal that even long before it, certain Azerbaijani women did initiate taking on leadership positions in the socio-economic and political life of the country, albeit not always being formally entitled as managers. For example, in the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, many prominent philanthropists and activist women such as Govhar Agha, Khurshudbanu Natavan, Nigar Shikhlinskaya, Sona Taghiyeva, Sofya Shahtakhtinskaya, Hemide Javanshir, Henife Melikova, Sara Vezirova, Khadija Alibeyova, Nabat Ashurbeyova-Rzayeva, Sara Ashurbeyli, and many other women-led and initiated numerous social, public and educational projects in the country (Vezir & Ismayilova 2008; İsmayılov, Vəzir & İskəndərova 2018).

Established in 1918 after the collapse of the Russian Empire, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic must be given great credit for “granting Azerbaijani women full political and civil rights” (Heyat, 2002, p. 58) as well as actively promoting the education of girls. Article 4 of the Declaration of Independence issued in 1918 guaranteed all citizens full equality regardless of ethnicity, religion, class, and gender (Prezident Kitabxanası, 2018; Nasirova, 2018). Women’s activity in this period was particularly notable in the sphere of education. However, within the very short existence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, while women did take part in parliamentary voting, their participation could not be observed in the state bodies’ managerial jobs.

In the mass emancipation of contemporary Azerbaijani women, their unveiling hijabs played a key role, which was initiated prior to introducing the Soviet propaganda on anti-veiling in the country in the first decade of the 20th century. Despite the arguments asserted by some Soviet scholars giving the credit of unveiling a campaign to the Soviet power, local women launched a movement, of which the Soviets very successfully made use (Kamp, 2014).

However, the Soviets should be acknowledged for making the education of women mainstream for all social classes, as well as fostering and promoting their unveiling. Even certain women (for instance, Ayna Sultanova working as a Minister) were functioning in the highest managerial jobs of Soviet Azerbaijan (Heyat, 2002). Although these appointments were condemned as being merely formal and for the sake of demonstrating the equality of the two genders in a Soviet country to outsiders, the initiatives did provide the society with a certain level of women’s emancipation. On the individual level, Tohidi (1998) argues that Azerbaijani women seemed to carry double identity- Soviet in public, Azeri in private, which implies that despite being responsible for certain social, political, and public roles, women were still viewed as the main carriers of household chores and supporters of their husband and children at home. Unlike Tohidi (1998), Heyat (2002) denies this dichotomy suggestion and notes that both identities were reciprocally influencing each aspect of an Azerbaijani woman’s life.

Having gained independence from the Soviets in 1991, Azerbaijani society became exposed to some religious and pop-culture trends, which obviously impacted the role and the position of women (Tohidi, 1998). In the first years of independence, values such as respecting women by keeping them distracted from social, public, and political roles blended with religious views notably solidified patriarchal norms in the society and diluted possibilities for women to hold managerial jobs in various spheres. Despite this, towards the 2000s, the general inclination towards western values and societies taking place due to media and relative ease of travel to European

countries and the USA made shifts in minds and approaches towards women's active roles in different public and societal spheres. In this period, thanks to the relevant government policies and reforms, women started to become inseparable key players in a wide range of organizations and institutions across the country. Nevertheless, when it comes to managerial jobs, Azerbaijani women's activity seems to be rather limited.

Another thought-provoking aspect of the problem is Azerbaijani women's education. To be more precise, being underrepresented in managerial job positions can be explained by the lack of access to quality education. It is undeniable that conservative families with many restrictions towards girls and women exist in Azerbaijan (Heyat, 2002). The willingness of families to invest in their female children's education by sending them to prestigious local and international schools and universities, which could accordingly affect their future job opportunities, can also influence women's inclusion in managerial jobs.

Interestingly, some scholars even go so far as to relate professional gender disparity to the country's oil boom (e.g., Wallwork, 2016) and corruption (Heyat, 2002), which "excluded women from labour force" (Wallwork, 2016, p. 11). Referring to Michael Ross's theory on the negative influence of oil production on labour distribution in terms of gender, Wallwork (2016) argues that Azerbaijani women have been mainly concentrated in low-paying jobs, not being represented in the fields related to the oil industry of the country, which are relatively high paying. Besides this, women seem to be partially excluded from the local job market's illegal bribe business, which hinders their opportunities of being employed or promoted to managerial jobs (Heyat, 2002).

The challenging picture depicted above has triggered interest in the present research. The purpose of the present study is to examine the existing position of Azerbaijani women regarding managerial jobs in the spheres of education and public sector, as well as individual experiences and perspectives of a group of Azerbaijani women related to this. Drawing upon secondary data analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), the research seeks to explore how Azerbaijani women are positioned statistically with regards to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and public sector, how a group of Azerbaijani women in the fields of education and public sector reflect on their individual case and relevant trends in the country; to what extent they relate their situation to external influences such as access to quality education, organizational stereotypes and discrimination, family restrictions and women's internal inclinations sourcing from cultural predisposition. The research questions formulated by the present study are the following:

*What is the existing position of Azerbaijani women with regards to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector?*

*What are the experiences of a group of women in the spheres of education and the public sector regarding their position in the professional arena, particularly in management?*

*How do they explain and understand the existing position of Azerbaijani women with regard to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector?*

In the secondary data analysis, the study refers to books, scholarly journal articles, secondary documentation such as reports of the State Statistical Committee, data sets of the World Bank, and other public domain databases. The field study for the present research was conducted through seven interviews with educated women holding a master's degree or higher, working in various positions in the spheres of education and public sector. While some of them did have managing positions, some worked as mid-level employees. Semi-structured questions had been prepared before the interviews were conducted.

At present, career promotion and educational perspectives of women in contemporary Azerbaijan in the spheres of education and public sector seem to remain scholarly undiscovered or are paid scant attention in the literature, and the subject seems to be confined to very few scientific papers and books discussing gender issues in Azerbaijan in different directions. For instance, Tohidi (1997) discusses the identity of Azerbaijani women in the light of ethnic, religious, and cultural heritage. Heyat (2002) refers to archival and literary sources and the narratives Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijani women portray in their overall lifestyle; Heyat (2002) also explores the various influential factors such as Islam, Soviets, and local traditions. Wallwork (2016) discusses gender gap issues in the local labor force market, specifically within the country's natural resources. Another source by UNDP (Vazirova, 2018) analyzes contemporary Azerbaijani women's activity in the private sector by shedding light on gender-specific barriers and facilitating factors. As it might be implied, available sources do not particularly address the specific subject matter of this paper, i.e., women in managerial jobs in the education and public sectors. Therefore, there seems to be an emerging need to address the existing literature gap about the subject. This interdisciplinary study might carry considerable implications for certain socio-economic spheres of the country, including the managerial labor force in education and the public sector.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The following questions framed the present study:

*What is the existing position of contemporary Azerbaijani women with regard to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector?*

*What are the experiences of a group of women in the spheres of education and the public sector regarding their position in the professional arena, particularly in management?*

*How do they explain and understand the existing position of Azerbaijani women with regard to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector?*

To explore these questions, secondary data analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis were used.

To answer the first research question, secondary data for the present study was collected from various sources, which can be grouped as public domain databases and scholarly sources. As a part of the public domain databases inquiry, a dataset of the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan named Women and Men in Azerbaijan (2018) was referred. The State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan was also requested to provide a report on the number and proportion of men and women studied abroad with the state-sponsored program. Additionally, other datasets such as Demographic and Health Survey-2011 (2013) by Ministry of Health of the Republic of Azerbaijan, gender parity index by UNESCO Institute for Statistics on School enrolment, datasets of Caucasus Barometer and World Values Survey were referred. Scholarly books and articles for the research included Tohidi's (1997; 1998), Heyat's (2002), Wallwork's (2016), and Mammadova's (2016) works.

Empirical data for the study was collected through in-depth qualitative interviews. Since the methodological approach of the empirical part of this research is interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher attempted to investigate reflections and analysis related to “lived experience” (Mills & Birks, 2014) of participants through interviews to describe and interpret the essence and nature of experiencing a phenomenon. In addition to this, the author was interested in how the research participants explain and understand the existing position of Azerbaijani women with regard to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector.

In methodological literature, it is generally advised that the number of interviews ought to be at least five for interpretive phenomenology until saturation is achieved. Accordingly, the field study for the present research was conducted through seven interviews. The participants for the study were recruited through a snowball process. To clarify, one of the participants, Sevil, is a colleague of the researcher working at university through whom she met another participant, Sevda, who had studied with her at university. After interviewing Sevda, upon the request, she then introduced the researcher to an acquaintance of hers to participate in my research. Thus, the author continued in this manner to recruit people for the study, being introduced to each participant by a previous one until saturation. All participants were educated women holding a master's degree or higher, working in various positions in the education and public sector fields. During the research, all of them were in their thirties. Five of them identified as married, one was single, and another was divorced. While some of them did have managing positions, others worked as mid-level employees. Table 1 describes the participants' demographic details.

**Table 1**

*Research participants: age, job, partner status*

Pseudonym	Age	Job	Partner Status
Nurlu	35	Secretary at ministry	Single
Sevil	35	Instructor at university	Married
Ilaha	36	Administrator at university	Married
Arzu	35	Manager in an educational organization	Married
Medina	35	Manager in a private educational company	Divorced
Sevda	36	Consultant in a governmental agency	Married
Miray	36	Manager in a governmental agency	Married

Since every individual experience and perspective is unique, it is important to keep the questions flexible in interpretive phenomenological research. As the research aimed to gather open-ended data, gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives, and allow them to provide deeply ingrained personal accounts, the researcher adopted a semi-structured mode of interviewing. The interview questions were broad and open-ended, by which it was sought to encourage

the interviewees to elaborate further on their answers. Semi-structured questions had been prepared before the interviews were conducted. Four of the interviews were conducted through the telephone, while three of them were face-to-face. Each interview continued for about an hour.

Further to the field study, the content of the interview processes was transcribed manually. Following the transcription stage, the researcher started by quickly browsing through the compiled transcripts and making notes on the content accordingly. Then, the compiled material was reread carefully and analyzed accordingly. Appropriate excerpts were marked to create meaning units. The horizontalization method was used to analyze the data, giving equal weight to each selected excerpt.

Each interview session was audio-recorded, on which the participants were informed and to which they consented before questioning them. The participants were informed about the content of the interview questions prior to providing their accounts. In the paper, the pseudonyms are used for all interviewees, and any identifying details are concealed to maintain confidentiality, which was declared to the informants before questioning them. A summary of the findings was sent via email to those interested.

The researcher did not face significant challenges in the data collection process except a slight delay with one participant, Miray. To clarify, despite being very excited about taking part in the study, she, a mother of two, kept postponing the interview due to not having sufficient time caused by her job responsibilities and household chores. After approximately ten days of negotiating the interview's time and date, she eventually found time during her lunch break, and we had our interview via telephone.

## **Researcher Stance**

In interpretive phenomenology bracketing, the researcher's judgement and assumptions are of utmost importance. It is usually done to reduce bias while at the same time staying tuned to the researcher's own judgement and beliefs to remain highly sensitive to the participants' accounts for overt and tacit meanings (Shepherd et al., 2010). To this end, the researcher's judgement, thoughts, reflections, questions, and other notes about the participants' accounts were noted before, during, and after the interviews in my telephone notes.

In addition to this, it is worth noting that rapport between the researcher and the participants in the interpretive phenomenological analysis is vital to facilitate a better quality of the data (Alase, 2017). It helps the informants to feel relaxed and provide more detailed and sincere accounts. In this study, the researcher spent considerable time developing the relationship with the research participants by having a sincere conversation before recording the interviews to make them feel at ease and develop a sense of trust. The researcher is also of a similar age with the participants and has a similar background, i.e., educated and employed in the sphere of education, making the rapport building process reasonably smooth.

## **Secondary Data Analysis**

### **The paradox of Statistics or Diploma as a Dowry<sup>2</sup>**

This section discusses several dominant statistical trends concerning contemporary Azerbaijani women in education, civil service, and parliament. It starts by looking at the statistical snapshots of Azerbaijani women students in primary and tertiary education; then it continues by providing relevant tendencies from professional spheres.

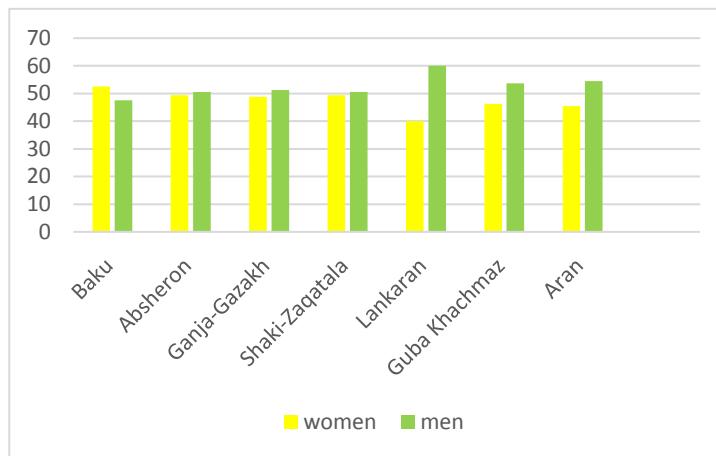
Interestingly enough, numbers in official statistics of Azerbaijan do not speak entirely against women in the field of education by suggesting that the system has virtually managed to achieve gender parity with regards to the number of students in recent years, including equality in literacy rate and tertiary education enrollment (State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, 2018, p. 93). To compare the situation with the countries in the region, it can be observed that although non-post-Soviet neighbors such as Turkey and Iran seem to lag in these terms, a similar tendency can also be observed in neighbouring post-Soviet countries (Wallwork, 2016). It is reasonable to assume that the mainstream education policy of the Soviets influenced the present situation in Azerbaijan and other countries. Overall, people in post-Soviet countries, including Azerbaijan, do not tend to view their female children's education

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<sup>2</sup> In Azerbaijan, there is tendency dating back to Soviet times to treat education of girl children as a symbolic ‘cehiz’ (dowry equipment provided by future bride’s family to fill the house of newly married couples) by some conservative families. It is said that they educate their girls to create financial guarantee in case the girls get divorced or something unfortunate happens to their spouse. However, as long as a woman has a husband who is able to financially support her, her education or diploma is usually treated as a part of her dowry.

as a serious threat to their local traditions and religious beliefs, which seems to stand in contrast with the aforementioned Middle Eastern non-post-Soviet countries.

As shown in Figure 1 below, in the capital city Baku including its regions, women seem to dominate in terms of the number. However, the figures do shift in favour of men as the geographical distribution extends towards the regions, though not quite considerably. An exception to the tendency is Lankaran, conceivably one of the most conservative regions of the country. To support the fact, in Demographic and Health Survey Azerbaijan 2011, it is stated that “one in four women living in Baku has attended university” (p. 21).

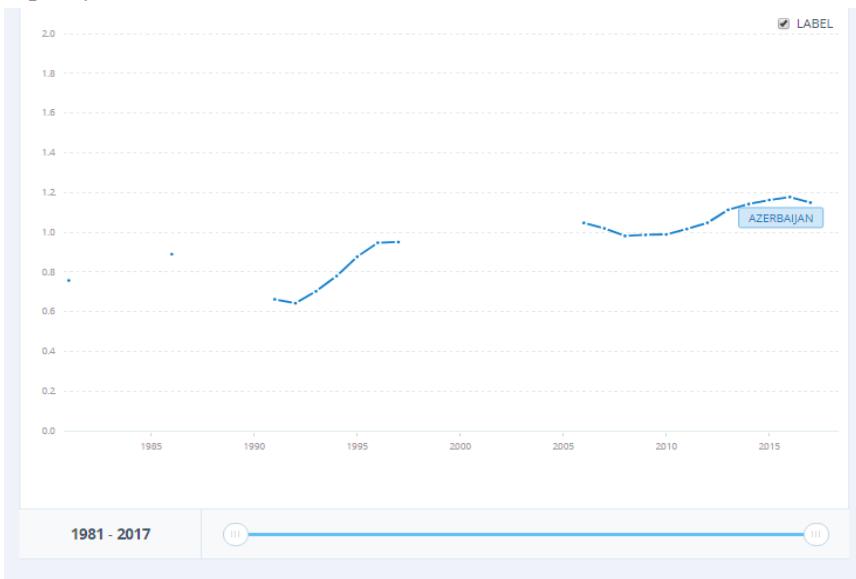


**Figure 1.** Distribution of students of the Republic of Azerbaijan having finished full-time general educational schools and received a school-leaving certificate and admitted to higher educational institutions in 2017 by gender, %.

Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).

In fact, these statistical indicators presented by the State Committee and Demographic and Health Survey Azerbaijan 2011 are quite consistent with the gender parity index (See Figure 2 below) presented by the World Bank for the years 1981-2017 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). It can be seen that there has been

a remarkable improvement over the presented years in tertiary enrolment concerning gender parity.



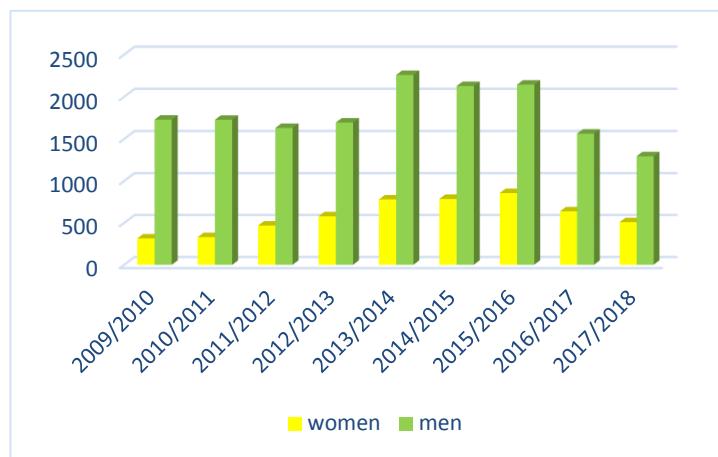
**Figure 2.** *School enrollment, tertiary (gross), gender parity index (GPI).*

Source: The World Bank

The illustrated trends suggest that Azerbaijani women generally do not face extremely severe challenges in being educated. Although the roots of this could be linked to the mainstream Soviet education tradition, the recent increase in numbers of tertiary education enrolment of women can generally be explained with a rising inclination towards modernization and demands of the globalized world, which is thirsty for knowledge societies. However, these trends could be questioned in terms of the quality of education that Azerbaijani women receive, i.e., whether families invest sufficient financial means and effort to provide quality education for

girls or merely educate them for the minimal employment perspectives or guarantee in case they do not have an employed or well-to-do marriage partner. For instance, a source on human capital development (Mammadova, 2016) claims that due to inferior government efforts to improve education quality, it is mainly the rich who can afford a better quality education in Azerbaijan. This assertion carries implications for attitudes towards women in Azerbaijani education as well. A low-income family with a limited budget for children's education is likely to invest more in a boy's education than a girl's, given the dominant patriarchal norms of the Azerbaijani society and girls' approach' employment perspectives. For example, a better-quality education in Azerbaijan usually means receiving education abroad,

which can only be considered a luxury for most Azerbaijani girls. Solid evidence to this assumption is a statistical report acquired from State Statistical Committee. It indicates that the number of women sent abroad to study with the state-funded program throughout 2009-2018 is not equal to the half number of men in the same program. Over the period, the proportion of women slightly increased, while still remaining considerably less than 50% of the number of men.



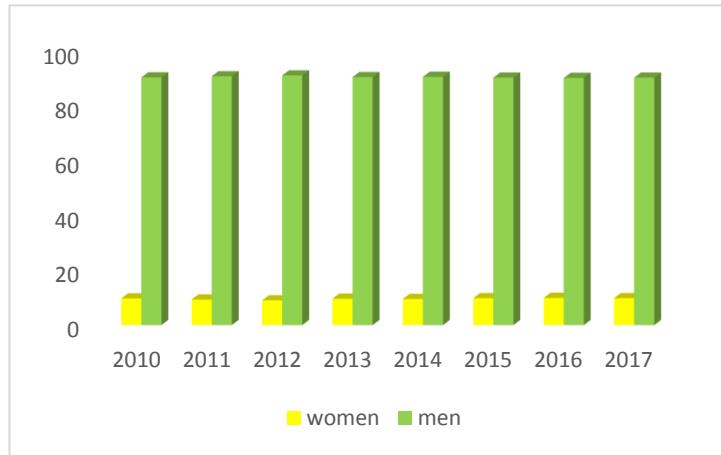
**Figure 3. Gender Distribution of People Studying with Governmental 'Study Abroad' Program.**

Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).

Though not so optimistically, these statistical trends on education seem to promise a certain potential for women's participation in managerial jobs. Except for women studying abroad, the fact that female students have almost reached equality with men in proportion and the fact that women have started to be more widely enrolled in higher education can serve as the basis of this interpretation.

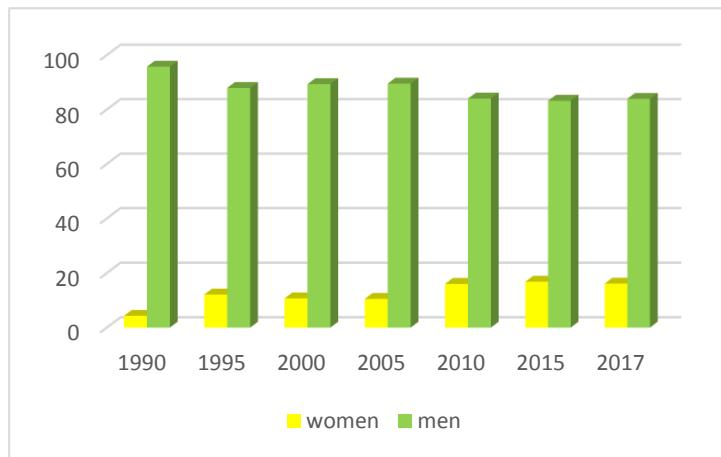
Nevertheless, the current job market of the country does not seem to confirm the expectations. Only a minimal number of women have been able to acquire managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector, although women do not dramatically lag in some aspects of education as students in statistical terms. A brief look at gender distribution in the country's public sector and educational institutions can serve as good evidence for this (see Figure 4, 5, and 6 below). In civil service managerial jobs, women hold approximately 10% of the positions, and among parliament members, they have only just above 16% of the seats. Although the number of female parliamentary members increased since 1990 from 4.1% to 10%, the same cannot be stated about civil service managerial jobs, where only a

very minor rise can be observed. Wallwork (2016) notes that the number of women in the Milli Majlis – parliament does not even reach the regional average.



**Figure 4.** *Gender Distribution of Managerial jobs in Civil Service.*

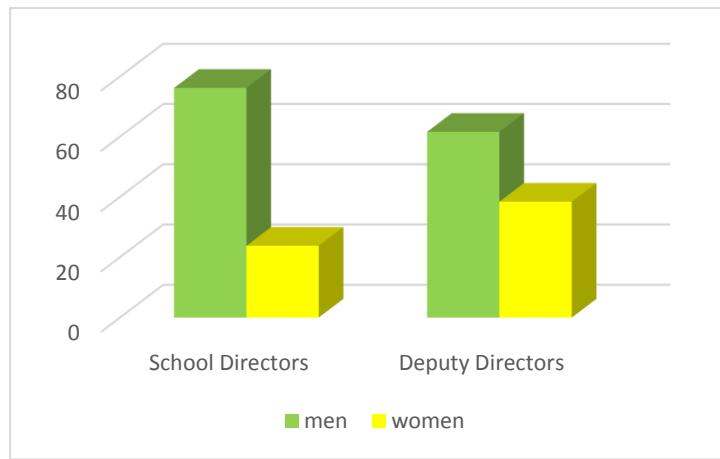
Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).



**Figure 5.** *Gender Distribution of Parliamentary Elections.*

Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).

Regarding the sphere of education, in general educational schools, women comprise approximately 20-30% of school principals and roughly 40% of deputy directors (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** *Gender Distribution of Directors and Deputy Directors of full-time general educational institutions at the beginning of 2017/2018 academic year.*

Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).

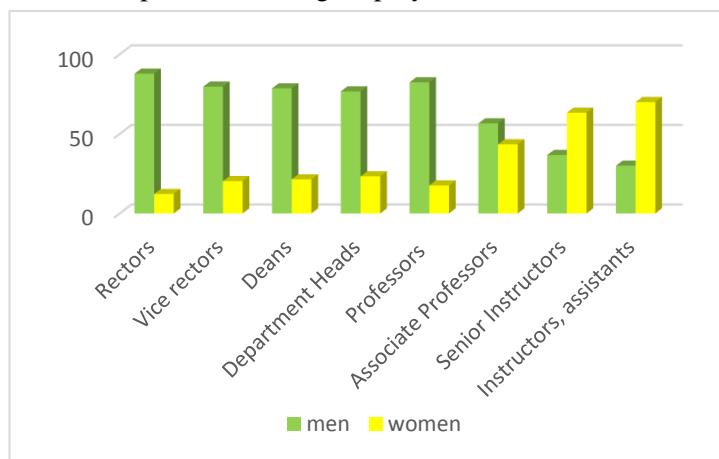
The trends presented suggest a marked gender inequality of managerial jobs in civil service, parliamentary positions, and general educational institutions. These patterns can be perceived as one of the major threats to society's development by lessening and weakening its human potential in a wide range of aspects. It is rational to assume that the explanation and solution of the problem should not be confined merely to the concept of gender inequality since solving only inequality might be possible with the imposition of relevant quotas on institutions and organizations by the government. The problem should, primarily, be viewed and analyzed from the lens of equity concept, i.e., how much fair opportunity women receive in the local socio-cultural setting, how much support and motivation they acquire from external parties, such as families, friends, workplaces, and other organizations to move towards managerial jobs in organizations and institutions, how the society itself treats stereotype and discrimination problems and how fairly the local socio-cultural setting with the existing gender roles shapes women's minds and attitudes concerning functioning as managers. All of this highlights the socio-cultural environment's role in balancing the genders' participation in managerial jobs of education and the public sector.

### **Either Teacher or Doctor**

As briefly illustrated in the previous section, in comparison with the spheres of civil service and parliament, in education, there does not seem to be an incredibly

substantial statistical gap between the two genders in managerial jobs, on which it is elaborated in this section.

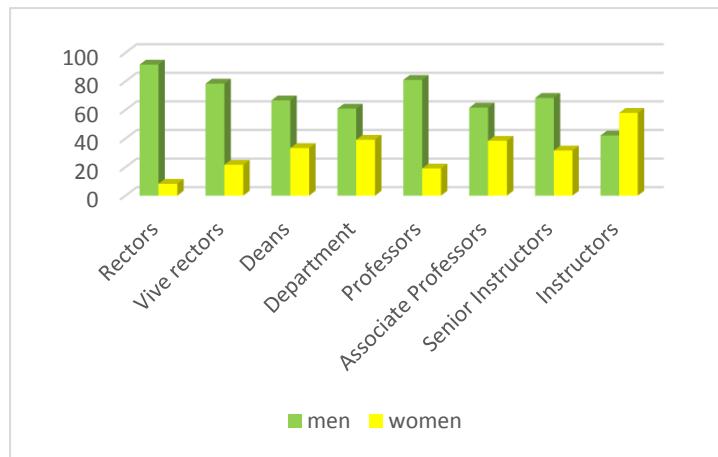
One may very often hear the following statement from the older and more conservative portion of people in Azerbaijan: “If a woman is to work, the best profession for her is either teaching or working as a doctor” (Anon., n.d.). It is essentially asserted due to these jobs not having very fixed working or workplace hours, which might potentially assume that a woman might devote time to her family and household chores parallel to being employed.



**Figure 7. Gender Distribution of Teaching Staff of State Higher Educational Institutions at the Beginning of 2017/2018 Academic Year.**

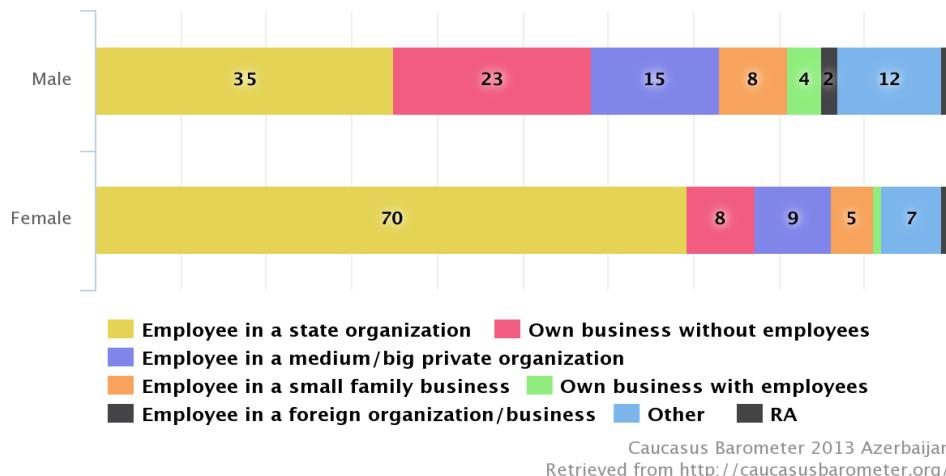
Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).

As a matter of fact, official numbers suggest that most Azerbaijani women tend “to follow this advice” (Wallwork, 2016). To be more precise, the proportion of woman teachers (see Figure 7 and 8) for the academic year of 2017/ 2018, as opposed to rectors, vice-rectors, and other managing positions, both in state and non-state higher educational institutions, is almost more than three-fifths of the whole.



**Figure 8.** *Gender Distribution of Teaching Staff of Non-state Higher Educational Institutions at the Beginning of 2017/2018 Academic Year.*

Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2018).



**Figure 9.** *Gender Distribution of Employees in Different Fields.*

Source: Caucasus Barometer

To support the abovementioned facts, another interesting dataset obtained from Caucasus Barometer (Figure 9) indicates that among 1,988 respondents, the proportion of women in state organizations is twice as much as their male

counterparts, which is most probably due to their being in the majority among teachers and doctors.

The major explanation for this tendency lies in the fact that women are generally considered responsible family members for household chores; therefore, possessing a profession that grants them the flexibility of time is considered a treasure for some families. These women contribute to their families' budgets and, at the same time, can devote time to taking care of family and household chores. For some women, this label of being employed is a reason, or even a blessing, to leave home and build relationships with other community members. It, arguably, in its turn, negatively affects the professional productivity of female teachers as it raises doubts concerning women's actual engagement with work. To clarify, since most female teachers are mainly concerned with the compulsory teaching part of their profession, they do not tend to invest or are deprived of desired time and energy for professional development opportunities. Consequently, this can be one explanation that the path to managerial jobs in most educational institutions, naturally, seems to be blocked for most women teachers.

Heyat (2002) mainly refers this attitude of families only to urban ones who describe their wish to see their daughters and daughters-in-law as only doing “temiz bir iş” which means “a clean job” or a job not involving heavy manual labor, not consuming a lot of time and energy, and culturally appropriate for a woman (p. 132). This thought-provoking statement can be analyzed in two directions. First of all, Heyat's (2002) reference to urban families can be linked to the fact that overall, urban families compared to rural ones do not seem to totally oppose employment matter of women though mainly confining it to teacher and doctor professions. Many women in some rural areas do not possess the luxury of having an opportunity to be employed whatsoever, let alone any discourse of working in a profession of her choice. Secondly, the phrase “a clean job” potentially assumes that the sphere of education is considered an acceptable field for women while others out there are labelled as unacceptable by the patriarchal society's rules. In this regard, as Soman (2009) notes, assigning meanings to women in various social relations is highly typical of patriarchy. This implication can explain why the existing gender gap among school directors, school deputy directors, deans, and department chairs of educational institutions is not as extreme as in most positions in public sector fields. It can be assumed that the existing system of social rules and practices views an educational environment as a safe place for women where they are not involved in manual labor, intensive interaction with the opposite gender, or corruption cases.

### Bread by Husband and Stereotypes

This section analyzes several gender-based stereotypes and beliefs having structured the current gendered patterns in the Azerbaijani society.

Relatively older women usually utter an Azerbaijani saying to younger women as a blessing: “May you eat bread earned by your (future) husband.” It basically implies that a woman should not bother to earn a living and instead live on her husband's financial means. It is not surprising in a society as Azerbaijan with patriarchal traditions, since some women consider being employed as a loss of “xanım-xatınlıq” or gentleness and nobility as a woman (Heyat, 2002). Tohidi (1998) discusses this paradox in a very thought-provoking manner. She notes that, on the one hand, there is legislation ensuring equality of both genders; on the other hand, patriarchal norms seem to dominate in familial life. Azerbaijani women seem to enjoy this paradox since it makes them feel protected (Tohidi, 1998, p.88).

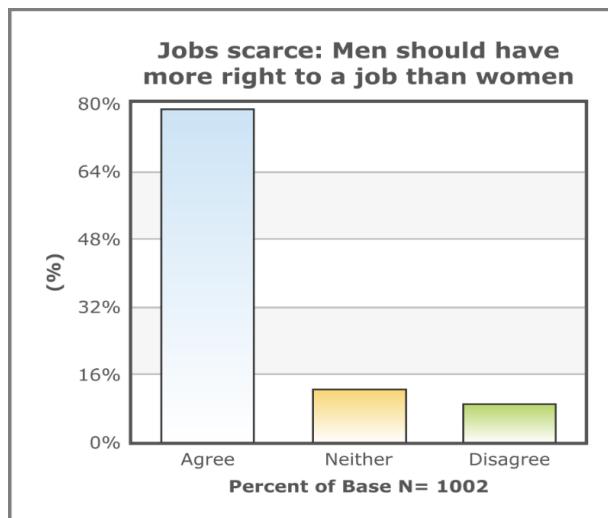
As Buddhapriya & Khandelwal (1995) note, no systematic evidence has ever indicated women's incompetency or ineffectiveness as managers. However, gender-based stereotypes seem to persist in many societies, and Azerbaijan's case is no exception. A survey conducted in Azerbaijan among 1002 respondents, including 70% female respondents by worldvaluessurvey.org, revealed impressive results. In the dataset, 37.6% of respondents believe that “If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems,” including 29.6% of all woman respondents (Figure 10).

Another very thought-provoking result presented by the same survey indicates that almost 80% of the respondents, including 72.8% of female respondents, agree that when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women (Figure 11).

The two survey results presented above serve as strong evidence to the local saying mentioned at the beginning of this section and support the assumption that men are the rightful job holders over women, a stereotype formulated by Azerbaijani society. Today, in Azerbaijan, some women with a well-off husband are considered lucky not to work, whereas some women carrying their family's financial burdens and yearning ‘to eat bread earned by their husbands’ are generally regarded with pity by surrounding people. Although it is true that a certain proportion

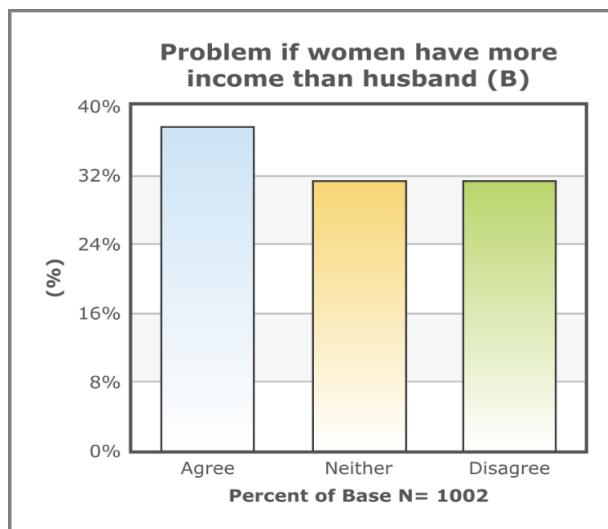
of women in Azerbaijan might be completely content living on the financial means of their husbands, it can also be presumed that it is mainly the man-dominated socio-cultural system that instilled this approach into women's minds. Azerbaijani men, by and large, seem to consider a financially successful or independent woman as a threat to their supremacy both in their family and at work; therefore, this belief that

a woman should rely on her husband is grounded in the idea that it is for the woman's best interest, for her rights and comforts, and perpetuated by multiple generations. The effects of this belief can be regarded and observed as a loss in the country's human potential capital and, by extension, are a threatening remark for a society claiming to have equal rights for both genders.



**Figure 10.** A survey results.

Source: World Values Survey



**Figure 11.** A survey result.

Source: World Values Survey

## Empirical Data Analysis

To answer the following research questions, an empirical study was conducted.

- *What are the experiences of a group of women in the spheres of education and the public sector regarding their position in the professional arena, particularly in management?*
- *How do they explain and understand the existing position of Azerbaijani women with regard to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and the public sector?*

Discussing the general existence of women in the job market, particularly in management, most Azerbaijani women were described as “outnumbered” by almost all of the interviewees; however, it was also noted that the women’s prospects of promotion could be closely field-related. As an example, Nurlu, 35, living abroad and working in an administrative position at one of the Azerbaijani embassies in a foreign country, assumes that a woman’s chosen field has a significant say in her career opportunities for promotion, i.e., the socio-cultural system treats some professions as more acceptable for women rather than others.

*‘I think it mostly depends on the fields where women work. If she is engaged with fields, such as health and education, which are generally accepted as more suitable for them in our society, the opportunities for development might be more favorable. But if they are working in “non-traditional” spheres, such as police, military, judiciary and etc., career developments might be more problematic.’*

This thought has clear links with the previously discussed mentality of ‘a clean job’ for women (Heyat, 2002) and local statistical trends serving as evidence to it, i.e., women are more welcome as teachers and doctors. It looks like this is a crucial player in identifying the career opportunities of an Azerbaijani woman. As Nurlu argued, career development prospects are much higher in the spheres where their participation is accepted as a norm, i.e., the probability of becoming a department chair at university or a school deputy director for a woman is more straightforward than that of having a managerial position in the public sector. It basically assumes that an ambitious woman willing to be promoted in the sphere of education is likely to receive more support or at least acceptance from surrounding people such as her family and co-workers, which increases her opportunities to succeed and be promoted to managerial jobs.

This section on empirical data attempts to blend research participants' personal experiences with their understanding and explanation of the general situation in

society regarding women's position in managerial jobs in education and the public sector.

Two themes were grouped as a result of the coding process: 1) families and 2) stereotypes, discrimination, and gendered cultural norms.

## Families

The lack of willingness of families to invest in their female children's education was generally not experienced personally by interviewees. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that almost all of them were born and raised in an urban setting, i.e., in the country's capital, where more liberal approaches towards career promotion can be observed at present. That being said, it should also be mentioned that all of the participants demonstrated awareness of the cases of educational restrictions on female children in Azerbaijan, in particular, in the rural regions located outside the capital city Baku. They usually hear of such cases about the families of their acquaintances or members of extended family. Examples of these restrictions include depriving girls of high school and university education or investing sufficient financial means to receive a quality education.

When asked about whether her family was unwilling to support her in terms of education or not, reflecting on her case, Sevil, an instructor at one of the local universities, noted the following about educational support:

*'I don't think so. In my environment, it wasn't the case.'*

However, she continued with the following words, noting that she did experience negative attitudes from her family when she was making a career choice:

*'Actually, everything starts from family. They always say you need to find a job appropriate for a woman. In my childhood and teenage years, I heard all the time that the best profession for a lady is either a teacher or a doctor. Because you have to work part-time, and if you are a doctor, it is preferable if you work with females, so that you don't have to interact with men more. Or you don't work full-time, or you don't work at nights; because you have to consider that in the future you will have a family, children and you have to accommodate this somehow. I remember the time when I wanted to be a journalist. My family didn't oppose, but kind of mocking me, that when I run after each man, begging, they will be insulting me. Kind of discouraging...'*

This account suggests that a certain level of restriction towards Sevil in career choice was demonstrated covertly rather than overtly. As it was described, this restriction consisted of showing the necessity of family responsibilities to her by degrading the jobs they found not acceptable or by exaggerating their disadvantages. The major implication is that families still seem to instill traditionally accepted gendered values framed by the absence of feminist thoughts and the importance of ‘a clean job’ values into the young generation’s minds as a norm.

The interviewees also spoke about the role of families in their already-established work life. When asked about the family restrictions she encountered after being promoted to a managerial position in an educational organization, Arzu, functioning as a mid-level manager, answered that she did not encounter any restrictions in her family. Her husband did not express any objection in this matter. On the contrary, she felt considerable support and encouragement from her husband and other family members. Similarly, Medina noted that she was lucky enough to have her whole family, particularly her mother, who had always supported her to go forward both in her education and work, and she never felt insecure in these terms. In their accounts, Arzu and Medina seemed to distance themselves from most local women around them by stating about ‘being fortunate enough’ to possess a supportive family, encouraging them both in education and career and not imposing restrictions. However, on a critical note, these women framed this positive tendency solely to moral support. They do not identify their families as distinct or liberal in terms of the traditional socio-cultural values, i.e., their husbands and fathers did not share equal family or household responsibilities. Consequently, this suggests that there is still room for improvement even for families who support their daughters, mothers, and wives concerning education and career, specifically regarding how well they understand and practice the concept of equity.

Having said this, interestingly enough, in terms of promotion, it was also noted that the role of family restriction with regards to educating female children minimizes as long as a woman grows in personality and work life. Sevda, working as a consultant in a governmental body, noted the following, by denying the factor of family restriction on education in the question of promotion of women to managerial jobs: *‘I don’t think education has much to do in this case. In Azerbaijan, two women with the same level of education could be in completely different positions. I think it is a matter of character rather than education.’*

By ‘a matter of character,’ Sevda refers to a woman’s willpower and motivation, and she considers that these weigh heavier than her education to open a path for her as a manager. It should be noted that character building is not an isolated process and can be shaped by more considerable influences from external sources such as

parents, teachers, peers, coworkers and even marriage partners. In this sense, it is reasonable to assume that attitude, values, and beliefs demonstrated and preached by these parties play an undeniable role in the formulation of a woman with a strong character. It is essential to consider whether a woman's parents preach the 'bread earned by husband' value or the opposite, as discussed in an earlier section, whether or not families encourage women to work as teachers or doctors solely because this provides them with the flexibility of time, or whether a husband considers household chores and child care solely a woman's responsibility or the contrary.

### **Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Gendered Cultural Norms**

The participants' social and organizational stereotypes and discrimination in the places where they work or used to work, defined as external restrictions by the present study, were also reflected upon in a very thought-provoking manner. Sevda, for instance, highlighted that since it is "easier" to work with men, at her workplace, it is males who are usually preferred for promotions or other work opportunities. Here, the adjective easy seems to be equivalent to available, i.e., working extra hours and open to business travels. It usually happens, Sevda argued, because most women at her work see their job merely as a source of money, not as a place to improve skills and knowledge or advance professionally. Sevda's description of the problem can be interpreted as a description of benevolent sexism rather than hostile sexism, implying that most women belonging to the Azerbaijani culture do not identify such attitudes at the workplace as unfair. In this type of culture, sexism is accepted as a norm instead of egalitarian cultures where both benevolent and hostile sexism are regarded as unfair phenomena (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Beydogan, 2002). As the participant depicted this situation, she did not seem to be completely at odds with it, yet she shared that since women prioritize family responsibilities, employers do not, as a rule, view them as potential candidates for managerial jobs. Soman (2009) frames such a tendency of a patriarchal society with Bourdieu's theory on reflexivity, i.e., through the internalization of the external relative hierarchy of existing gender roles, men exhibit dominating behavior while women demonstrate conformity to them, accepting unfairness.

Although interviewees working in the public sector mostly discussed similar work situations to the one described by Sevda, in the private education sector, liberal and more motivating approaches toward women employees could be observed. For instance, Medina working in a managerial position for a private educational company, shared the following about her present workplace case: '*I don't feel*

*discriminated at my work. On the contrary, I feel encouraged. At present, my mentor is a man, and he encourages me.*

Such an advantage of having a male mentor to provide motivation seems to deny the generally existing belief about women's current active discrimination and complete lack of support in pursuing managerial jobs within institutions. Madina's case in the private educational company can serve as an important example in several respects. She not only denies discrimination existing in her workplace but also delightfully shares her experience of having a male work mentor. Such an example cannot be considered a typical case in workplaces, particularly in the education sector, where women are considered safe in terms of relatively infrequent interactions with the opposite gender.

These two women, a governmental consultant and an educational company employee shared dissimilar snapshots from their work life, highlighting diverse approaches towards women at workplaces and their opportunities to establish a managerial position. One of them questioned the way women were not considered for managerial jobs at her workplace while simultaneously blaming the life choices women made themselves for this. The other was agreeably acknowledging that a male mentor at work is a support and inspiration source for her. The reasons for this thought-provoking diversity could be the varying work cultures in private and governmental organizations and the backgrounds of people working in those places.

That being said, Medina recalled that a few years ago, society, including employees in the companies where she used to work, was of a different opinion and exhibited quite a different approach and behavior towards the fact that she was a manager: '*At the beginning of my career if I went to a meeting as a project manager with my male assistant, males on the other side of the table, would not look at me...would avoid eye contact with me.*'

These thoughts are important in highlighting that only in recent years, a change at an organizational level towards women aspiring for and already working in managerial jobs seems to have gradually taken place. When asked what they believed caused such a shift in some people's attitude and approach, participants noted that it was mainly accomplished women who have built successful careers in management and were able to change people's minds, approach, and attitude. It could also be linked to the facts presented in the secondary data analysis of this study, i.e., the relative, though very insignificant, increase over the years in the number of women getting general and higher education and women with overseas education. These could be one reason for having raised more confident women with more liberal views and efforts. Thanks to these trailblazing women, the communities' trust in women-led

organizations and projects seems to be gradually increasing, and the attitudes tend to be more accepting. Soman (2009) defines this as aspiring women's survival strategy in a patriarchal society by which they challenge and question the culture and society with their education and career achievements. It can be referred to as Azerbaijani women, too, although in general, they do not openly challenge the socio-cultural structure without crossing borders of strict restrictions.

In most interview responses, a great emphasis was put on the historically formulated cultural norms of Azerbaijani society, which manifest in most people's approach towards working women. It was generally argued that although among many complex factors influencing women's career choices, gendered cultural norms of society are one of the crucial factors due to which women tend to set their priorities in favor of family and children rather than career opportunities. It is how Sevil sees it: '*People start shaping certain roles for women. And when you talk about top positions, they don't like it... they are very suspicious about it. And it affects women.*'

Sevil's remark is worth highlighting in several aspects. Not only does a woman with a willingness to pursue a managerial career need to reach an agreement with the existing norms, but she also has to struggle with skepticism thrust upon her. This undesirable conventionality could be a crucial factor influencing women's career paths.

Medina questioned the gendered cultural standards existing in the society in quite a criticizing and disapproving manner:

*'Get married, have a child, not even one child, and if you have one child, something is wrong with you. You'd better have at least two so that you are complete in your own eyes and the eyes of society. And this, of course, lags you. It is a lagging factor in terms of the career.'*

A woman is encouraged to build a career in compliance with society and culture, but she is also dictated how her family life should look and is required to fulfill expectations on this matter.

Miray, working in a governmental agency, highlighted that in families, the two partners do not usually share the same responsibilities, which influences the choice women have between career and family. Since wives are, as a rule, granted heavier responsibilities than husbands, priorities of women are set in favor of the family, rather than a career: '*Most men don't object women being in high positions, but they don't understand shared responsibility at home for kids and household chores.*'

As argued by Collin (2011), such family models of a patriarchal society have been formulated as a result of a facilitator role assigned to women historically. In less developed countries, due to significant gender gaps in the labour force, working women find it quite challenging to cope with both roles in an equally effective manner. Collins (2011) states that to change the existing structure for women's empowerment in such societies, it is necessary to foster a higher level of inclusion of women in productive forces rather than in caring labor.

Arzu noted that Azerbaijani men are always willing to be the dominant power in families no matter how open-minded and democratic they are, and reflected on her case as follows:

*I am a mom of a toddler girl. She is three years old. In our family, we happen to share household responsibilities with my husband. Yet, my husband being very democratic and being very liberal and feminist in his mindset, he still thinks that he should struggle more, he should be more aggressive. He should be the person leading. He should be the person bringing the most income.'*

The hybrid nature of Azerbaijani culture can explain such an attitude of men. The mentality of Azerbaijani men is the result of and influenced by various, sometimes contrasting, impacts such as Islamic and Turkic views and the ascendancy of the Western culture. It has led to the fact that even men identified as 'open-minded' do not openly or wholeheartedly accept family responsibilities equally and still assign patriarchal meanings to social relations between the two genders.

To the question, "if you wished to be at top management, what would be a hindrance for you?", Miray answered in this way, emphasizing the importance of responsibility she carries before her children: '*My children are the priority. Their future depends on me. My internal limitations would be a hindrance.'*

Sevil, who is a mother of twin girls aged 4, expressed a very similar view to the same question:

*'The problem is that I have the goal, maybe motivation, after family and children. When my children become more independent, our physical contact will not be the same...I might think about advancing in my career. Right now, they need me all the time.'*

Medina noted that in her case, lack of time would be a major hindrance for her. She had a son of whom she had to take care of; the time devoted to him would be the main restriction on the path to managerial jobs at her work.

A harmonic co-existence of family responsibilities, particularly that of motherhood, with a managerial position at work seems challenging for all participants. Yet, although they understand the difficulty, at the same time, they seem to be content with trading off a career in favor of their children at least until a particular stage in their life. A study by McQuillan et al. (2008) found that, in fact, motherhood and work are not competing and contradictory in nature, and such values and attitudes of women are the results of cultural myths imposed on them. These cultural myths or, norms as termed above, of the society constantly teach and preach women's heavier familial role as the primary one compared to her work position. To be dispelled, these myths need to be treated by the efforts of both external restrictors in society, families, and organizations, and women themselves, i.e., their willingness and internal motivation.

## **Conclusion**

For centuries, Azerbaijani women have been functioning as indispensable members of social life. However, their participation in the job market's managerial jobs is open to interpretation in the light of inequality and inequity questions. The study aimed to examine how Azerbaijani women are positioned statistically with regards to managerial jobs in the spheres of education and public sector, how a small group of Azerbaijani women in these fields, and how they reflect on their individual case; to what extent they relate their situation to external influences such as access to quality education, organizational stereotypes and discrimination, family restrictions and women's internal inclinations sourcing from cultural predisposition. Secondary data analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis were used to reach the purpose.

The secondary data analysis revealed that although the educational representation of Azerbaijani women seems to make them eligible for managerial jobs, this expectation is not confirmed when current statistical trends of the local job market in the education and public sector are analyzed, i.e., significant gender gaps in both spheres can be observed. In the public sector, there is a much higher level of gender inequality in comparison with the sphere of education.

The interpretive phenomenological analysis found that family restrictions towards research participants are generally demonstrated covertly rather openly. Certain conservative values and beliefs have been instilled into these women's minds to discourage them from functioning as managers. A woman with a willingness to pursue a managerial career needs to agree with the existing norms, and she also has to struggle with skepticism thrust upon her. These gendered cultural norms and expectations have accordingly impacted and formulated internal perceptions and

motivation of women. Due to them, most of the research participants cannot set or cannot see career as one of their primary life goals or advancements in life, which in turn significantly affects the underrepresentation of women in managerial jobs. As the participants reflected upon their personal cases and relevant trends in the country, while access to quality education and organizational discrimination seem to play a relatively minor role, other factors such as overall societal norms sourcing from gendered cultural norms became the foremost reasons for this internal formulation.

While some research participants' families and male co-workers support them to move towards managerial jobs, they do not do it openly. Various, sometimes contrasting, impacts such as Islamic, Turkic, and Western values can explain some Azerbaijani men's mentality. It implies that there is still room for improvement, even for such families and workplaces, regarding how well they understand and put into practice the concept of equity. Women should be provided with sufficient and equal opportunities to devote to their career, which can be obtained through sharing equal responsibilities in household chores and care of children and valuing a woman's job responsibilities and potential as equally prioritized as those of men's.

This research attempted to contribute to gender inequality and inequity questions existing in Azerbaijan's education and public sectors by shedding light on existing statistical trends and experiences of women in the fields. Hence, this study argues that among many complex influencing factors, gendered cultural norms create internal barriers for most Azerbaijani women to improve professionally and achieve managerial jobs in education and the public sector. To eliminate those internal barriers, it is suggested that fundamental attempts be made to change the values related to women's responsibilities, career, and education deeply ingrained and preached in families, workplaces, and educational institutions. In families, individuals should understand that a female child should be educated because it is crucial to her future career endeavors, not a dowry. In workplaces and educational institutions, sufficient support, encouragement, and mentorship should allow women to overcome internal barriers and unlock their potential as managers and leaders. Not only will this improve the human capital potential of the country and create actual equality, but it will also change women's acceptance of their potential as educational and public sector managers and increase their motivation in career.

To conclude, it should be noted that the empirical part of the research was conducted with a small group of women and is not generalizable to larger groups; however, the findings could be useful in studying women from similar contexts. Future research in the field could be conducted with less advantaged groups of women, such as those living in rural areas.

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