

## BEYOND BREAD AND BUSSES: WOMEN AND WORK IN AZERBAIJAN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Baku at 4am. Though I could see little of the city and its outskirts during my night ride from the airport, the first step out of my apartment into the already sweltering August morning was a remarkable experience. My apartment, located near the oldest areas of Baku was a venerable building, a solid stone and concrete example of the oil-boom architecture of more than one hundred years ago that today dominates the city center. Ornately carved facades and doorways, winding alleyways of cobblestone, fruit and grocery sellers at every corner—I could almost be in a small town in Europe. Certainly the number of women walking around the city with headscarves was similar to what one might find in major US or European cities. But within a few days I realized that cafes and restaurants, places a visiting researcher might go in public to meet and observe new people, were, with the exception of the affluent Fountain Square central shopping area, primarily for men. To find women to hang out with I would either need to spend part of each week in the hair salons that dot every neighborhood (but my hairstyle didn't need it), or spend time in people's homes—both decidedly more cloistered and private settings.

A specialist in Women's Literature and Gender Studies, I am particularly interested in the current home and work conditions for women in Azerbaijan. During my year's stay (2007-8), I observed and talked with both men and women about their experiences and thinking about the state of gender equity in Azerbaijan. My methodological approach is interdisciplinary, bringing together statistics that describe living conditions of the general population with life narratives that reveal the particular situations and views of individuals. I seek to build on work focusing primarily on the first decade after independence such as Farideh Heyat's excellent study of urban educated women in Baku and Manijeh Sabi's study of the economic and political transformation of Azerbaijani women after independence. What follows is a very preliminary, and necessarily incomplete, discussion of my observations, research and interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009. I hope that it serves as a beginning for further, more comprehensive research and analysis on this topic by both many others and myself.

## GENDER EQUALITY

*Men and women have equal rights.*

*Article 25 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

The image of the liberated Central Asian woman—as symbolized by discarding the veil (a scene memorialized by a frequently-photographed Soviet-era city plaza statue in Baku)—was widely used by the Soviet government to support their policies of intervention in the region and accepted even by Westerners as one of the few positive outcomes of the USSR period. In fact, a movement towards gender equity, particularly in the western influenced capital of Baku, began even before the Bolshevik takeover. Enlightenment influences and the Oil Boom of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries recreated Baku as an international and cosmopolitan city, where reformers worked actively for the rights of women and the education of girls. The plays and later writings of Mirza Akhundzadeh—or Akhundov—(1812-1878) reflect a growing social concern with the treatment of women. During the first, albeit brief, period of independence in 1918-1920, Azerbaijan was one of the first nations in the world to enfranchise women, giving them the vote. Later, under the USSR, women were educated and labored alongside men as doctors, teachers, and industrial engineers. Yet after more than 90 years of legislated equity, the last eighteen under independence, women today comprise only 11% of the national legislative body, and when asked what the biggest challenge for women in Azerbaijan is today, the director of a local NGO working on women's development replied with little hesitation, “Work” (Ismailova).

## GENERAL WORK SITUATION

In her ethnographic study, *Azeri Women in Transition*, Heyat rejects what she sees as an exclusive focus on labor and economics (to the exclusion of ethnicity) as an unproductive lens through which to view the progress and conditions of women's lives in Azerbaijan (7-9). While I believe firmly in an interdisciplinary approach to social and cultural issues, and support Heyat's efforts to address the ways in which culture has had an enormous effect on the shapes of Azerbaijani women's lives, it became clear to me during my stay that, while culture and ethnicity were important, and indeed woven into every aspect of daily life, the governing determinants of well-being in most women's lives, as oil money created an increasingly two-tiered economy and skyrocketing inflation, were economic.

While unemployment is roughly comparable for more men and women in the country (7.1 % men vs. 6.5% women, 2006 UNECE) unlike men, you won't see

women sitting in cafes both day and night, or gathering on the street to chat. As in the rest of the world, women in Azerbaijan work hard in both paid and, notably, unpaid labor fields. While precise statistics on paid vs. unpaid labor are hard to come by, in Azerbaijan, as is true in many areas of the world, women's labor is far more likely to be unpaid than men's. Nearly 67% of women ages 15-64 work for wages in Azerbaijan (as compared to 77% of men)—a relatively high number. But due to gender role expectations, women are also the preponderance of workers in most unpaid sectors of domestic work and childcare, creating the “double-burden” discussed by both Sabi and Heyat. In her seminal study “The Second Shift,” sociologist Arlie Hochschild described the situation in U.S. households in the 1980s where both men and women worked for wages—yet more often than not, women still did most of the housework and childcare.

Traditionally, in the rural areas of Azerbaijan, while men herd animals, do larger scale agricultural work, or run businesses for money, women garden, do laundry, cook, preserve food, care for children, and in remote areas, carry water and prepare fuel from animal dung for cooking and heating for subsistence. Moreover, in many regions of Azerbaijan today, women may have a triple shift. It is not uncommon for village men to be absent much of the year, working abroad, particularly in Russia, engaged in various forms of more lucrative work than can be found in Azerbaijan, including business, construction trades, and selling their agricultural products grown in Azerbaijan. In these cases, women not only may have wage jobs (as teachers, shop clerks), but also manage all aspects of their farms and households for most of the year, as well as shouldering the house work and care for children (Wistrand, 2008).

In the capital city region of Baku, and to a lesser extent in the larger towns of Ganja, Lankaran and Guba, women are also employed in other sectors, particularly small businesses. While officially gender equity is legislated, in practice, women throughout the country work primarily in lower paid, though not always lower-skilled, fields such as education and health care, while men hold nearly 100% of positions as police, high level business management, transportation and construction workers. Only 11% of legislature positions are held by women.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, in 2007 women held nearly 70% of positions in the field of education and nearly 80% of those in the health and social services

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I use the Azerbaijani governments' own published statistics, which have little reason to play up gender differentials, and indeed many reasons to downplay them (a note at the bottom of one set of statistical data on gender differentials in positions and salaries, remarks emphatically, and by their own data, perhaps too optimistically, that, “These differences existing in the society between the sexes are increasingly being eliminated” (“Methodological Explanations,” The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.wazstat.org/statinfo/labour/en/043.shtml>. Accessed July 31, 2009.)

fields. The fields with the lowest participation of women are construction (women are 8% of workers), mining (14%), financial activity (34%).

In sectors where women predominate, wages are notably lower than in sectors where men predominate, even when equal or additional training and education is required. In 2007, the overall average salary for the male predominant sector of mining was 846 AZN/month; for the financial sector, 709 AZN/month; for construction, 381 AZN/month.<sup>2</sup> By stark contrast, also in 2007, in fields where women are the majority of the workers, salaries averaged 145 AZN/month for education; and 95 AZN/month for health and social services—of major sectors only agriculture and fishing posted lower average salaries. Yet overall averages do not tell the whole story, for in every sector, women make significantly less than men—even where they are the majority of the workers. In education, for example, where up to 70% of the positions are held by women, women's average monthly pay is 130 AZN vs. 186 AZN for men. That is, women earn only 70% of what men earn in a field in which women actually predominate. The situation is even worse in health and social services where, as stated above, women are nearly 80% of the workers. There, women's average salaries per month are 80 AZN while men's are 146 AZN; women earn only 55% of what men earn. This discrepancy is partly explained when you look closely at where men and women are employed within a sector.

Considered together, wage and employment sector statistics reveal the fact that not only do women hold the majority of positions in low-paying sectors of education and health care, but even within those sectors, women hold the lowest paying positions. In the important civil fields of public administration and defense, women hold 28% of the positions. Yet a closer look at the data reveal that while women hold 58% of the positions at lower levels of public administration and defense (labeled Supplementary Posts in the statistical tables), they are only 22% of mid and higher-level workers (1-9 Classifications). At the very highest classifications, the situation is even more discrepant: women are only 10% of the deputy heads of divisions and only 7% of the heads of divisions. That women nevertheless make 80% of what men make in this sector—one of the most equitable in terms of wages—says more about the relatively flat wages across classifications in government positions than it does about gender equity in the sector.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2007 1 AZN = approximately 1.18 USD.

## **COST OF LIVING**

Azerbaijan is a modernizing country, where, in 2008, fuel costs were nearly 80% of those in the United States. How do its people, much less its women earning such low wages, live, particularly in the high-cost region of the capital city Baku? In the countryside, most families still rely heavily on living in their own houses and growing their own food and, even, creating their own heat and cooking fuel. But, with the exception of bread, buses and the subway costs (rates kept artificially low by the government), prices of rent, food, utilities and gasoline, prices in Baku are quickly approaching those of any major United States city. Nevertheless, salaries for the professions usually occupied by women are largely the same anywhere in the country—whether in the expensive capital or in the rural areas. In fact, despite the lower rural cost of living, under a new program to attract teachers to the rural areas, education salaries are now somewhat higher there than in the cities—sometimes with a house and chickens thrown in. When asked if this bonus would entice them to move to the countryside to teach, my university students laughed. They say life is hard in the rural areas—and Baku is where the money and the places to spend it are.

## **SURVIVAL**

To make ends meet, most women not only supplement their salaries with extra work for money, they work all summer preserving large quantities of foods from the countryside for use in the winter and by family members living in the expensive capital year round. It is not uncommon for women in the countryside to prepare all the meals not only for their locally resident family members, but also for their urban relatives, shipping weekly meals and preserves made from their own agricultural produce and meats in pots and jars, via bus and train. The cost of sending meals on the ubiquitous mini-busses that ply routes linking the entire country is, remarkably, far cheaper than buying and preparing food in the capital city, Baku.

In addition, the communal family is the norm, particularly for women. Adult children often live with their parents, but while middle class families in the capital may try to purchase apartments for their older sons to move out and occupy, even before they marry; women are always expected to stay at home with their parents unless they marry—in which case they often move into the husband's family home, where they are expected to take-over a significant portion of the domestic work from the older mother-in-law. In fact, even in cosmopolitan Baku, a never-married woman living alone is deeply suspect as having dubious moral character; few young women choose to face such social

sanction. Even foreign women who come to the city for research or international employment can find themselves labeled prostitutes should they live alone (Wistrand). As a result, low wages in sectors occupied by women are in fact subsidized by the social stigma of female independence (Omarova).

## **BARRIERS TO EQUAL PARTICIPATION**

Though educated in the same system as men and reportedly graduating from universities now at nearly the same rate as men, in Azerbaijan, women's ability to participate in the workforce is limited by the intersection of challenging economics with traditional, male-dominated gender expectations. Repeatedly, research in developing countries has proven that to educate girls and women is to raise development indicators in a wide variety of areas from birthrate to health to GDP. The positive statistics for girls' education in Azerbaijan, however, fail to account for some of the local particularities that continue to limit the progress of girls and women, and so the entire country.

### **BARRIERS TO EQUAL PARTICIPATION: HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES**

Despite the fact that the birth rate has dropped nearly below replacement level at 1.8 per woman (2007, UNICEF), women continue to be seen primarily as mothers and to occupy social positions vis-à-vis family roles that can severely restrict their ability to participate or advance in the wage labor market (Ismailova, 2008). Mehrangiz Najafizadeh has noted that women's burden of "carework"—including both paid and unpaid care for others, has only grown heavier in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (two articles, 2003). While the average age of marriage for women has risen to nearly 24 (2004, World Bank), throughout the country, women are traditionally expected to marry before the age of 25 and have their first child shortly thereafter. This means that women have heavy household responsibilities at the same age most would be trying to get a university education and start a career. Indeed one young woman university student said that she would now advise other women to wait to get married, after her own difficult experience juggling university and family.

By informal observation, I realized that among the teachers in the faculty of literature at the Azerbaijan University of Languages, many women in leadership were single or divorced and had either forgone marriage and family in favor of a career or, for those with children or elderly parents to care for suffered under the burden of a "double shift," expected to maintain a household at the expense

of career advancement. This inability to spend significant time on professional scholarship and service activities that will advance careers of the women who are the vast majority of secondary and entry-level higher-education instructors is not only detrimental to the status of women, but, indirectly, also can only be a drag on Azerbaijan's ongoing struggle to provide overcome corruption in the education sector.

Equalizing pay scales across jobs requiring similar training and education levels, such as teachers and police, can help reduce the excuses for corruption made by workers in positions both customarily female (who participate in corruption because their salaries cannot support them) and customarily male (who participate in corruption because they claim to be the primary support for others). Low wages in female dominated job sectors are subsidized by a gender expectation that women are someone else's dependent. But of course, many women support their families, whether because they do not have a father or husband to support them or because their father or husband is unemployed. As a result, many turn to corruption to supplement a poor income, especially in the service sectors. Ironically, corruption in male dominated sectors is also bolstered by gender expectations: The supplementation of higher wages through bribery in the overwhelmingly male professions of police and military officers is justified by the expectation that men must, after all, support a family—even though not all do. A widely told joke based on the common knowledge that road police entrap drivers to extract bribes illustrates how gender roles intersect with and help maintain systematic corruption: A traffic policeman, in an official report to his superior, writes "Given my current economic hardship, incurred due to illness in the family and my son's wedding, I request permission to use an 'Entry Prohibited' road sign for three months" (Talishinsky).

In the capital, soviet era preschools and kindergartens continue to offer some valuable childcare for working parents; however, childcare is far from universally available and is rarely an option in rural areas. Moreover, there continues to be some stigma attached with not caring for a child at home with the result that most women rely on relatives to care for their children while they work. In an example of the resilience of women and their ability to work-around the "double-shift" dilemma, one teacher I met lives with her mother in the suburbs of Baku during the work-week so that her mother can care for her young school-age daughter before and after school while she works long hours running a private language learning program for foreigners. She sees her husband on weekends. Her mother also provides another valuable service for this teacher and her daughter—she does the cooking and household chores for all of them, tasks that would take significant time from this teacher's day were she living with her husband all week. Most food preparation is done from scratch. Few households yet have clothes washing machines, much less

dishwashers. Utilities, including gas, water and electricity service, are uneven, resulting in extra labor to “work-around” outages. Other teachers I met who had school and university age daughters tried to do most of the family’s expected domestic work, so that their teenage and adult daughters could devote all their own time to schooling and career. This was often; it seemed, at the expense of the mothers’ own career advancement.

Even for older women, household responsibilities can be limiting. The aforementioned women’s development NGO director and her mother have a running joke that her mother can never be more than two hours away from home, or her father will go hungry. Even though privately some men admit to “helping” with household chores at times (particularly when their wives are sick), they do not feel comfortable exposing this publicly; a man who does such work is heavily ridiculed as a “houseman.” But traditional roles are not set in stone. The malleability of these roles and gender perceptions in the face of globalization is reflected in the following story: After a visit to the US with his academic wife on a Fulbright grant, where he witnessed American men sometimes doing housework and serving their wives food and drink, one husband will sometimes make and bring tea to his wife and even to her friends—at least when a foreign woman is in the group. However, this is still not something he would comfortably do among an all-Azeri group of friends.

## **BARRIERS TO EQUAL PARTICIPATION: THE EDUCATION DILEMMA**

Education would seem to be a huge success for girls and women in Azerbaijan, with upwards of 98% literacy among both men and women and 97-99% of girls finishing primary school (2007, UNICEF). In secondary school girls’ enrolment drops to about 75% of boys’, but remains a healthy number. But these enrolment statistics can hide what is happening on a daily basis. Though urban girls are usually expected to complete their secondary education and many complete a Bachelor’s degree (exact statistics not available), gender expectations continue to negatively affect the participation in secondary and higher education of rural girls. In Xinaliq, a remote village in the Caucasus Mountains, girls are expected to marry within their village, usually before the age of twenty. Even in the wealthier families, where sons have taken advantage of university educations, girls stop attending secondary school regularly in their teens. One villager from one of the most respected families in the village, a man in his mid-thirties with a graduate education, told us that his fifteen year old sister goes to the newly built secondary school; five minutes walk from their house, only two to three days a week. He explained that this was normal, as she had household duties and would soon marry anyway. She had already had three



proposals of marriage. Though she and the family had not yet deemed any men suitable, it was likely she would become married and a mother in the next year or two. The year 2000 saw the very first girl from the village of Xinaliq to go on to a university education (Clifton, 6).

Even if a girl from a rural village did want to continue her university education in one of the larger towns or in the capital, very few families are willing to allow their daughters to live independently away from home. As discussed above, single women of any age living alone are suspect as immoral. Even in their 30s and 40s, single women usually continue to live with their parents. If a girl from the countryside is lucky enough to have relatives, or a brother studying at the same time in Baku she can live with, parents are sometimes more open to the idea. The downside of living with male relatives in the city is that the young woman is often expected to cook and clean for them—even when either are in school or working. One young woman I met had argued repeatedly with her mother about washing her younger brother's laundry (which most must do by hand, using unreliable water services), despite the fact that the young woman was holding down a job while also attending university, while her brother was only a student. Another Baku resident, who often works as a driver for foreign workers, rents out the bottom floor of his family's house to young women from the countryside that are studying in Baku. He, his wife and three children live on the top floor, offering an affordable and respectable family-based living arrangement for rural girls seeking a higher education.

## CONCLUSIONS

As this is only a preliminary discussion of my research, I am hesitant to draw hard conclusions, much less prescriptions about the current conditions under which women live and work today in Azerbaijan. What seems clear is that for women in Azerbaijan, having a job and an education is not a predictor of an equitable place in society. Yet, the legislation for equity is in place, and I remain convinced that it is in these important sectors (economics and education) that women have their best chance of creating an equitable, fulfilling livelihood and life. When I last interviewed the aforementioned director of a local women's development NGO who had spoken of work as women's most pressing issue, she had changed her mind on the question. No, she said, it was not work per se, but rather "collaboration" that was perhaps a more critical issue.

Upon further thought, this leader in women's issues felt that while work issues were of central concern for women, things didn't stand to change until women did a better job of collaborating in their change efforts. Of course, women in

Azerbaijan clearly collaborate with great skill to hold village-wide celebrations, feeding and entertaining hundreds of people; and they run farms and families collaboratively. But the type of collaboration and collaborative leadership necessary for social and organizational change is learned in the public sphere, in management roles in business and political settings—sectors in which women do not have many leadership positions or experience. And so one comes round again to the question of labor equity.

Further research on the status of women and work in Azerbaijan might consider the efforts of women to enter higher levels of management in business, education, non-profit organizing and government, and the availability of training and support to make those bids successful. Mehrangiz's study of women's "social entrepreneurship" in Azerbaijan is an important start on looking at how women are trying to sidestep the male-dominant sectors of finance and government while conforming to social expectations of caregiving by forming their own NGOs and soliciting funds and other support from outside the country. Further, the remarkable capacity Azerbaijani women evidence in their traditional organizational skills at the family and small community level ought to be studied for the ways in which this offers women a powerful base on which to develop and extend organizational expertise into more public sectors.

In considering the scarcity of positions for women in higher levels of employment in Azerbaijan, I am reminded of the current conundrum of women's sports in the United States. Since the passage of legislation in the early 1970s that ensured equal opportunities to girls and young women in publicly funded educational institutions, particularly in the area of sports, most young girls now grow up with significant experience, and many with great skill, in sports. Yet, with few professional sports opportunities, most girls drop out of participation in sports in their early teen years—not unlike the declining attendance of Azerbaijani girls supposedly enrolled in village secondary schools. There's just no reason to keep going: As I was told time and time again by people across Azerbaijan, these girls' future roles as important members of their families and communities lie elsewhere than the public sphere—as mothers, household managers, entry-level service workers. One young woman I spoke with, who has a university degree in aerospace engineering in finding it impossible to get a job in her specialty—managers have even said directly to her "Do you really want to work with all these men?" The correct answer for a proper woman in Azerbaijan is, of course, "No."

It will be interesting to watch as women's professional sports slowly gains some footing in the United States, as it seems to be doing, and see whether this changes the choices and so leadership potential of girls and young women in the field. It will be doubly interesting, and far more important, to see if the women

of Azerbaijan can gain the requisite foothold in sectors that give them support and training to effectively collaborate in positions of organizational leadership in the public sphere. Perhaps experience with professional collaboration in the public sphere can give women a chance to make lasting changes in their work world that can ensure a more equitable and fulfilling life for all Azerbaijanis—finally answering the challenges to the status quo that their reformer ancestors set in motion in 19<sup>th</sup> century Baku.

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*Summary***BEYOND BREAD AND BUSSES: WOMEN AND WORK IN  
AZERBAIJAN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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This article describes some of the historical background and current conditions of gender equity in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Recognizing that efforts towards the education and participation of women in the public sphere began even before the ostensibly gender transparent policies of the USSR, the author argues that while women are an integral part of many sectors of the waged workforce, they labor under the conditions of what Hochschild terms the “second shift,” still holding primary responsibility for both child care and household management. Moreover, as Azerbaijan has moved into the period of independence in the last two decades, women are essentially excluded from the higher levels of two (intertwined) sectors of business and politics—the primary locations of power in the nation today. While there has been in the last decade a veritable explosion of non-governmental organizations started by women and focused on local gender issues, women’s exclusion from the highest levels of most public and private sectors has led to a lack of public professional skills acquisition and practice, further limiting their efficacy in organizing for social changes.