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## Social Exclusion of Women in Azerbaijan

By Severina Müller, Baku

### Abstract

This article discusses the issue of female social exclusion based on two nationally representative surveys conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in Azerbaijan in the years 2011 and 2012. The surveys provide insight into Azerbaijani attitudes towards gender roles, division of labor and the participation of men and women in domestic and public life. The results show that women in Azerbaijan are more limited in their opportunities to get involved in social, economic and political spheres than men.

### Introduction

As in some other parts of the world, social exclusion of women is pervasive in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has been characterized as a country where women are systematically excluded from participation in some social activities, as well as economic and political life. The absence of the female population in these areas has implications not only for women themselves, but also for society as a whole, thus exacerbating poverty and maintaining disparities in health, education, and economic achievement. Beyond that, Azerbaijan has the third highest rate of sex-selective abortion in the world.<sup>1</sup> These forms of marginalization makes it difficult to achieve society-wide goals, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) identified by the United Nations as a benchmark for recognition to women's rights in 1995.

Women's status and rights in Azerbaijan are underlined by the interaction of gender, traditions and culture. Patriarchal traditions and patterns persist in Azerbaijan, thus affecting attitudes about the division of roles among women and men in the domestic and public spheres.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, male predominance may become grounds for unequal treatment and social exclusion of women. These factors contribute by establishing an unequal power distribution between men and women and in creating a strong basis for female social exclusion.

It is important to note that Azerbaijan is set apart from other predominately Muslim countries around the world that may exhibit different aspects of female social exclusion in a variety of ways. Azerbaijan is one of the predominately Muslim countries (along with the five Central Asian countries) that was a part of the Soviet Union and which has a secular state. Thus, modern-day Azerbaijan has been influenced by its history of Soviet education, formally-atheistic Soviet state ideology, and various other social, political and economic campaigns intended to sculpt Soviet citizens.<sup>3</sup> While this past has arguably provided advantages and disadvantages for the country, today education plays an important role for both girls and boys and school attendance is mandatory for everyone in Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup>

Exclusion appears in many of the obstacles adolescent girls encounter during the transition to adulthood, including finding work, learning life skills or participating in civic life. By denying women access to resources, markets and decision making, social exclusion may maintain poverty at the individual and household levels.<sup>5</sup>

1 Economist, 2010. Gendercide: The worldwide war on baby girls. *The Economist*, March 4, 2010.

2 Azerbaijan Human Development Report. (2007). *Gender Attitudes in Azerbaijan: Trends and Challenges*.

3 Martin, Terry. (2001). *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

4 Thus, female participation in tertiary education is high, as 46% of the students in Azerbaijani universities are women; cf. The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2010/11). Retrieved from <http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/education/en/index.shtml> on 06/06/2012.

5 Hills, John; Le Grand, Julian & Piachaud, David. (eds.) (2002). *Understanding Social Exclusion*. Oxford: University Press.

In addition, expectations and actual experiences of exclusion and discrimination can cause feelings of powerlessness among those left out, which may in turn lead to low self-esteem and diminished aspirations for the future. The work of Caspi et al. (1998) has shown that these feelings can result in lower achievement among members of excluded groups.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, social exclusion of women may lead to consequences at the individual and the household levels, but also at the country level—excluded groups can be left behind when national economies grow. Social isolation and relative economic deprivation are often associated with poorer mental health, especially among females, and can further reduce the ability of excluded individuals to be productive members of society.<sup>7</sup>

This article discusses the topic of female social exclusion in Azerbaijan based on the results of a survey entitled “Social Capital, Media and Gender in Azerbaijan” conducted by CRRC in February 2012 and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The study draws on 998 completed face-to-face interviews. The survey used multi-stage cluster sampling with representation from the capital, as well as outlying urban and rural areas. In addition, there will be data presented from the Caucasus Barometer 2011, another nationally representative survey with a sample of 1,481 respondents.<sup>8</sup> The first section of this article will discuss gender roles and the of labor in Azerbaijan. The follow section outlines attitudes in the realm of education, labor market and politics. The third section provides data regarding exclusion on social activities.

### Gender Roles and Division of Labor

Some scholars, such as Somerville (2000), argue that the core meaning of social exclusion is bound up with social isolation and social segregation, and therefore claim that social mobility (or the lack of it) is crucial to understanding the content and extent of social exclusion.<sup>9</sup> Social mobility expresses the equality of opportunities and in this connection, gender division of labor between non-market and market work plays an impor-

tant part. It reflects prevailing patterns of social exclusion and can either mitigate or reinforce those patterns.

In assessing attitudes towards the gender division of labor within private spheres of life, the results of the Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey show that much of the Azerbaijani population holds traditional views about gender roles. According to the data, over half of the Azerbaijani population considers the main task of a woman to take care of her family. 67% of the adult Azerbaijani population thinks that a woman’s most important role is to take care of the home and cook for her family (68% of men and 66% of women). Moreover, 57% agree with the statement that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay (68% of men and 51% of women), and 61% think the children suffer when a mother works for pay (63% of men and 60% of women). With regard to who should be the main decision maker in the family, 77% of Azerbaijanis think men should have the final word about decisions in the home (87% of men and 66% of women).

The socialization patterns of Azerbaijanis support this type of gender-specific division of labor within the home. When asked about what tasks they were taught when they were children or teenagers, 96% of Azerbaijani women mentioned routine domestic chores, such as cooking and cleaning (32% of men said the same). In contrast, 74% of the men said they were taught how to fix home appliances (21% of women said the same). Thus, the data indicates that the attitudes about gender roles as well as the actual behavior within the family are rather traditional.

### Education, Labor Market and Politics

The results point to less female participation within public spheres of life. 58% of the Azerbaijani men (and 28% of women) consider themselves to be employed, and there are slightly more men (23%) than women (16%) who hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher.<sup>10</sup> With regard to foreign language and computer skills, the vast majority of both men (75%) and women (77%) reported having no basic knowledge of English. However, fewer men (19%) than women (37%) say they have no basic knowledge of Russian language, and also fewer men (65%) than women (76%) say they have no basic knowledge of computer skills.

When asked about attitudes towards job-related skills, 63% of the Azerbaijani population said that on the whole, men make better business executives and political leaders than women do (71% of men and 55%

6 Caspi, Avshalom; Wright, Bradley R. Entner; Moffitt, Terrie E. & Silva, Phil A. (1998). Early failure in the labor market: Childhood and adolescent predictors of unemployment in the transition to adulthood. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 424–451.

7 Patel, Vikram & Kleinmann, Arthur. (2003). Poverty and common mental disorders in developing countries. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 81(8): 609–615.

8 Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2011). *Caucasus Barometer*. [dataset] Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasus-barometer> on 06/06/2012.

9 Somerville, Peter. (2000). *Social Relations and Social Exclusion: Rethinking Political Economy*. London: Routledge.

10 Employment was defined in the survey as follows: “This employment may be part-time or full-time, officially employed, informally employed, or self-employed, but it brings you monetary income.”

of women). Furthermore, 58% agree to the statement that men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce (68% of men and 47% of women). However, 43% believe that having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person (34% of men and 52% of women).

Nevertheless, 83% of the Azerbaijanis say they would vote for a woman candidate in the next parliamentary elections (all things being equal), and 59% think that the current number of women members of the parliament (19 out of 125) is too few. This reveals that the Azerbaijani population is not generally disinclined to have women in important positions, yet men are still more represented in politics and the labor market.

Surprisingly, just over half of the population thinks that gender equality in Azerbaijan has already been achieved for the most part (59% of men agree with this statement while 45% of women say the same). The findings thus show that the population's attitudes towards gender equality are a bit ambiguous. Many people believe a man's role should be as breadwinner and a woman's role should be to perform housework and look after the children. Yet, much of the population also thinks gender equality has already been mostly achieved. This indicates that the perception of gender equality differs from the actual distribution of gender roles.

### Social Activities

Data from the 2011 Caucasus Barometer show that women participate less in a variety of social activities than men. When asked about different kinds of activities people have been involved in during the past

six months, 70% of the Azerbaijani men (and 43% of women) reported having spent time with friends at their own place or at their friend's place. Another 70% of men (and 2% of women) said they had spent time in a tea house during this period.<sup>11</sup> Azerbaijani men also indicate a higher level of involvement in sporting activities as well; 33% of men say they have participated in sports compared to 8% of women who say the same. With respect to civic engagement, more men (21%) than women (13%) say they performed volunteer work during the past six months. Furthermore, 45% of men (and 13% of women) said they had discussed politics with friends or colleagues during the past six months.

### Conclusion

The results of these two surveys reveal that there is a certain degree of social exclusion in a variety of arenas for many women in Azerbaijan. Compared to men, women have less access to opportunities for participating in social, economic and political life. Due to a traditional gender division of labor, women are more likely to be absent from the labor market as many people consider a woman's main role to perform housework and take care of the family. This leads to less mobility outside the domestic sphere and makes women more prone to social exclusion. Furthermore, women participate less in a variety of social activities than men and their professional skills, such as knowledge of foreign languages and computer abilities, are lower. General public opinion shows that there is an unequal distribution of power between men and women in Azerbaijan.

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<sup>11</sup> Visiting a tea house is generally reserved for men in Azerbaijani culture.