

The Development of The Women's Movement and The Place of Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Legal Documents in Azerbaijan¹

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Abstract

As the first country in the East to grant women the right to vote and be elected, new political strategies were defined in Azerbaijan after gaining independence in 1991. The main problems related to gender equality, which is one of the issues included in the new political strategies, are women's poor representation in public administration, early marriages, gender-based violence, women working in lower-paid jobs in the labor force, etc. During the presidency of both the father and son Aliyev, official international conventions on gender equality and women's rights were signed and official laws were adopted. The issue of gender equality and women's rights in official decisions of presidents, programs of state institutions and parties, and the effectiveness of these activities will be observed in this article. The official decrees, orders, and statements of the Presidents, statistics and projects of the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, gender statistics of the State Statistical Committee, the program of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party since 1995 and the data of the Milli Majlis will be analyzed as the objects of research addressed to the issues mentioned above.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Women's Rights, Gender Equality, Women's Political Representation

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Azerbaycan'da Kadın Hareketinin Gelişimi ve Yasal Belgelerde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği ve Kadın Sorunlarının Yeri¹

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Özet

Doğu'da kadınlara seçme ve seçilme hakkı tanıyan ilk ülke olan Azerbaycan'da 1991'de bağımsızlığın kazanılmasının ardından yeni siyasi stratejiler belirlenmektedir. Yeni siyasi stratejilerde yer alan konulardan olan toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ile ilgili temel sorunlar, kadınların kamu yönetiminde yetersiz temsili, erken yaşta evlilikler, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı şiddet, kadınların işgücünde daha düşük ücretli işlerde çalışması vb. olmaktadır. Baba ve oğul Aliyev'in cumhurbaşkanlığı döneminde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve kadın haklarına ilişkin resmi uluslararası sözleşmeler imzalanmış ve resmi yasalar kabul edilmektedir. Bu makalede cumhurbaşkanlarının resmi kararlarında, devlet kurumlarının ve partilerin programlarında toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve kadın hakları konusu ve bu kararların etkinliği incelenecektir. Azerbaycan Cumhurbaşkanı'nın resmi kararnameleri, emirleri ve açıklamaları, Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti Aile, Kadın ve Çocuk İşleri Devlet Komitesi'nin istatistikleri ve projeleri, Devlet İstatistik Komitesi'nin cinsiyet istatistikleri, iktidar partisi olan Yeni Azerbaycan Partisi'nin 1995'ten bu yana programı ve Milli Meclis'in verileri yukarıda belirtilen konulara yönelik araştırma nesnelere olarak analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, Kadın Hakları, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği, Kadınların Siyasi Temsili

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INTRODUCTION

Although political participation and the right to vote is the most important element for democratic countries, in some countries that practice democracy, half of all adult people are completely excluded from national political life simply because they are women. In the East, for the first time in 1918, the Declaration of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan granted the right to vote and be elected to all citizens of the country, including women, regardless of gender (Hasanov, 2005: 50).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the independence of Azerbaijan, new political policies were implemented in the country and strategic goals were set. Azerbaijan adopted the United Nations (UN) “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)”¹ in 1995 (State Committee on Family, Women, and Children’s Affairs [SCFWCA], 2022). In 1998, the State Committee on Women’s Issues which was replaced by the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SCFWCA) in 2006 was created, the first congress of independent Azerbaijani women was held, and in 2000 the laws “On the implementation of the State Women’s Policy in the Republic of Azerbaijan” and “National Action Plan on Women’s Issues of the Republic of Azerbaijan” were adopted. The State Programs included promoting and achieving gender equality. At the same time, in 2015, the “UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” was adopted, and the 5th goal is gender equality (UN, 2023a).

This study aims to analyze and show how the protection of gender equality and the establishment of women’s rights in Azerbaijan is approached and how much the set goals are achieved in the decisions made by presidents, official state institutions, and parties on gender equality based on international conventions. In this study, gender equality refers to the representation of women and men in different spheres of social life and state institutions, political participation, and inequality in the labour market; women’s rights refer to the right to vote and be elected, the right to education, the prevention and punishment of violence against women, early marriages and childbirth.

The research objects of the study are the official state laws enacted, statistics, and projects carried out by the SCFWCA, the program of the New Azerbaijan Party (NAP)² and its projects with SCFWCA, official gender indicators of the State Statistics Committee, data of the Milli Majlis (MM).

Firstly, the steps taken regarding women’s rights in the period before gaining independence will be included in the study. Then, local and international decisions on gender equality and women’s rights will be analyzed, and it will be observed how much these decisions are implemented in practice and whether they are effective or not. How and to what extent women’s issues are included in the programs and projects of the NAP, and the SCFWCA will be noticed and the practices of these institutions will be analyzed. The issue of women’s representation in politics will be evaluated through the statistics of women deputies in the MM, and women working in local institutions and municipalities. In addition, following the Global Gender Inequality Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the statistics of the State Statistical Committee, the changes in the rate of gender inequality in Azerbaijan and the latest situation will be indicated.

Formation and Progress of Women’s Movement in Azerbaijan Before Gaining Independence

It is known that the struggle for women’s rights is mostly fought in countries with a high level of political democracy (Heywood, 2013a: 236). However, the emergence and expansion of the women’s movement in Azerbaijan was observed in the early 1900s, when socialist views were still prevalent. This means that the struggle for women’s rights started before Azerbaijan began to exist as a liberal democratic country after 1991. The beginning of the struggle for women’s rights in Azerbaijan coincides with the period of the first feminist wave³.

Knowing that feminist waves were observed differently in different countries, the main aim of the women’s movement both in America and in European countries was to gain equal rights for women with men (Heywood, 2013a: 236; Wollstonecraft, [1972] 2020). In the Azerbaijani case, during the

¹ Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, CEDAW recommends a national action plan focusing on women’s rights and gender equality, emphasizing cultural and traditional aspects that influence women’s role in society and the family (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 1979).

² It was founded in 1992 by Haydar Aliyev.

³ According to Jennifer Baumgardner, the first wave corresponds to 1840-1920, the second wave to 1960-1988, the third wave to 1988-2010, and the fourth wave to 2008 and later (Özdemir & Aydemir, 2019: 1707).

absence of a democratic country, efforts were made for women's right to education and to vote before many democratic countries. One of the most prominent workers for women's education who is oil millionaire Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev opened a girls' school named "Aleksandrinskaya"⁴ in 1901 (Azerbaijan National Academy of Science [AMEA], 2008a: 163-164). However, the lack of female teachers prevented the development of women's education. In addition, in 1917, the Baku Muslim Women's Charity Society⁵, chaired by Liza Mukhtarova, opened a vocational school for poor girls (Mahmudov, 2004: 251-252). Another step was the decision to offer equal rights to study at the Baku State University⁶ (BSU), the first university of Azerbaijan, which started to operate on 1 September 1919. Since women's education was not widespread, only two of the 30 students who graduated from the first BSU in 1922 were girls (Mahmudov, 2004: 218-219). In 1921, the pre-school education institution for girls was transformed into the Higher Women's Pedagogical Institute in 1922 and became an institution where women teachers were trained (E-qanun, 2000a). With this, the problem of the lack of female teachers gradually began to disappear.

On the other hand, in 1917, the First Congress of Musavat Party⁷, one of the most important parties of Azerbaijan, was held on 25-31 October and the program of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic to be established in the future was drawn up (Mahmudov, 2005: 227). The revised program did not contain any article on providing equal opportunities between men and women, but in the Declaration of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan⁸, the article on the right of citizens of the country to vote and be elected was introduced. Based on the paragraph "*The Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan provides legal policy and citizenship to all citizens living in the country without distinction of nationality, sect, class, race, and sex* (Azerbaijani Popular Front Party [AXC], 1918)" in the fourth part of the Declaration, Azerbaijani women were given the right to vote and be elected in 1918. On 21 July 1919, the draft law on the adequate implementation of laws in terms of gender equality was adopted (Hasanoğlu, 2018: 19). Thus, considering that women gained these rights in America in 1920, in France in 1944 and in Switzerland in 1971 (Örs, 2014: 422-425), Azerbaijan gave these rights before many democratic countries.

After these changes, the expansion of the women's movement can be seen in the steps taken such as the establishment of women's departments in November 1920 and the first women's congress held in Baku on 8-11 February 1921 (AMEA, 2008b: 198). The chairman of the Azerbaijan SSR, Neriman Nerimanov, stated in his speech that the focus of the congress was the idea of women's freedom (E-qanun, 2000a). Among the main objectives of the congress was to mobilize the masses of working women of Azerbaijan and to ensure the work of emergency women's services (AMEA, 2008b: 198-199). At the same time, one of the most essential issues was that women were not fully free in social, political, and cultural life. Although the communists who came to power declared that they paid special attention to women's issues and that men and women had equal rights, there were still remnants of feudal-patriarchal relations (economic dependence of women within the family and household) among the population. Due to the abundance of women's issues, the problem of high illiteracy among the population could not be solved. To eliminate this problem, in March 1923 polygamy and early marriages were prohibited by the newly enacted law on marriage (AMEA, 2008b: 201). Women's clubs and rural women's corners started to be established to teach women's professions and reduce their illiteracy. The establishment of the first women's club on the initiative of Ceyran Bayramova and the publication of the magazine "Sharg Gadini" in 1923 played an important role in the development of the women's

⁴ Since girls from poor families were exempted from tuition fees at this school, 35 out of 57 students received free education in the first year of school.

⁵ It was founded in 1914 and ceased its activities in 1920 (Mahmudov, 2004: 251).

⁶ In the university, a law was also enacted on working women that the salary, pension, and fringe benefits of women in the university service would equal the amount given to men working in the same position (Mahmudov, 2004: 228).

⁷ Musavat was founded in 1911 in accordance with the instructions sent by Mahammad Amin Rasulzade who became one of the founders of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1918 (Musavat, 2023a).

⁸ On 26 May 1918, at the last meeting of the Trans-Caucasian Seym, after the institution decided to dissolve itself, representatives of the Azerbaijani faction held an extraordinary meeting on 27 May, and the Azerbaijan Provisional National Council was announced (Hasanov, 2005: 50). At the first meeting of the National Council on 28 May, the main directions of the foreign and domestic policy of the independent state were stated in the Declaration of Independence consisting of six articles.

movement (E-qanun, 2000a). Even in 1926, there were 42 women's clubs, and the number of working women exceeded 4000 in 1927 as women became more involved in the industry (AMEA, 2008b: 201-202). All this shows that after the first women's congress, great efforts were made to educate Azerbaijani women and increase their social activities. However, although the Communist Party paid attention to the women's issue, its main goal was to train and educate active female personnel who were committed to the "ideas of socialism".

The issues of women's freedom were mentioned in the first women's magazine "Ishik"⁹ published in 1907 (Mahmudov, 2004: 365-366), in the newspaper "Igbal" published in 1912-1915 (Mahmudov, 2005: 38), in the writings of Firidun Bey Kocharli¹⁰ (Mahmudov, 2005: 89), in the magazine "Molla Nasraddin" published in Baku in 1922-1931 (Mahmudov, 2005: 207), in the newspaper "Shargi-Rus" published in Azerbaijani language in Tbilisi (Mahmudov, 2005: 379) and in the declaration of "Hummat", a faction of the Parliament of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (Mahmudov, 2004: 463). The famous writer Jafar Jabbarli's theatre play "Sevil" about the headscarf movement was known as a great call for Azerbaijani women to fight for full public and social freedom (AMEA, 2008b: 313-314). In October 1928, a meeting was held in Baku on the headscarf issue, and the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR was asked to issue a decree prohibiting women from wearing headscarves. As a result, 12573 women refused to wear the headscarf in 1928 and 20387 in 1929. However, this movement was prevented by serious obstacles, threats, even punishment and death, and even the murder of Sariyya Khalilova, an employee of the club's sewing factory, by her pious father in 1930 led to an intensification of women's resistance to the patriarchal-superstitious household. The magazine "Sharg Gadini" also served to educate women by freeing them from the hijab, increasing the role of women in production, encouraging them to become more active in social and political life, and setting the main goal of improving the cultural, domestic, and quality of their life conditions.

In the following years, Azerbaijani women not only formed the basis of agricultural work but also took part in the construction of defense lines during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 (AMEA, 2008c: 11). It should be noted that out of 700000 conscripts from Azerbaijan in those years, more than 11000 were women (AMEA, 2008c: 9). Only Zulaikha Seyidmammadova, the first Azerbaijani woman pilot-captain, participated in more than 40 air battles (AMEA, 2008c: 36). In 1992, after the Khojaly tragedy, women were particularly prominent among the demonstrators who surrounded the parliament building to exert more effective pressure on the MPs and the government (AMEA, 2008c: 245). Gultakin Asgarova, Nurjahan Huseynova, Konul Kahramanova, Rahila Orujova, and Maleyka Ahmadova together with hundreds of men took part in the Armenian-Azerbaijani wars and fought heroically for their homeland (AMEA, 2008c: 256). This means that even during Soviet rule women worked together with men in the field of labour and the war.

Last but not least, to further revive the role of women in social, political, and economic life, the Azerbaijan Women's Congresses held in 1957, 1967, and 1972 were effective in the development and better organization of the women's movement (E-qanun, 2000a).

Decisions on the Development of Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the Period After Independence

One of the first steps taken by Azerbaijan to continue its existence as a liberal democratic country was to draft a constitution. The right to equality in Article 25 of Chapter 2 of the Constitution adopted on 12 November 1995, devoted to fundamental rights, freedoms, and duties, stipulates in paragraph 2 that women and men have the same rights and freedoms, and in paragraph 3 that they can be members of political parties, trade unions, and other social associations regardless of their gender (Constitution, 1995). Even when Azerbaijan became the first country in the East to abolish the death penalty¹¹, this

⁹ In the series of articles titled "Haklarımız [Our Rights]" by the editor Khadija Alibeyova, equal rights for women, calls for their participation in education, culture, and social life, the opening of women's clubs, literacy courses, education of children, housework and health problems were discussed (Mahmudov, 2004: 366).

¹⁰ As an educator, journalist-writer, literary critic, translator, member of the "Musavat", and one of the signatories of the "Declaration of Independence" in 1918, he played an important role in awakening the national consciousness of the people and preparing them for the struggle for independence (Mahmudov, 2005: 88-89).

¹¹ A de facto moratorium on the death penalty was imposed in 1993 and formally abolished in 1998 (AMEA, 2008c: 289).

law was first applied to women and elderly people over 65 years of age in 1996 and then extended to all citizens of the country in 1998 (AMEA, 2008c: 289).

Apart from national decisions, Azerbaijan has also participated in international agreements on gender equality. The National Women's Committee in Azerbaijan prepared a national report and submitted it to the IV World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, which was one of the first steps taken in Democratic Azerbaijan about women. In 1995, Azerbaijan ratified CEDAW organized by the UN (SCFWCA, 2022). Subsequently, on 14 January 1998 "On Increasing the Role of Women in Azerbaijan", the State Committee on Women's Issues was created to ensure a more organized implementation of the state gender policy (E-qanun, 1998). Azerbaijani women's congresses have been organized every five years since 1998 to strengthen women's politics. Immediately afterward, with Decree No. 289 on 6 March 2000, the "Decree on the Implementation of the State Women's Policy in the Republic of Azerbaijan" was adopted (Aliyev, 2000). In the Decree a provision on ensuring equal representation of women with men at the managerial level in state institutions was included. It is also noted that Azerbaijani women were at the forefront of the struggle for independence and since 1988 they have participated in the complex processes in the republic on an equal basis with men. The famous journalist Salatin Asgarova and doctor Gultekin Asgarova are the best examples of women struggling for independence.

It is possible to say that the steps taken in the 1990s and 2000 on women's rights within the framework of human rights in Azerbaijan played an important role in its admission as a full member of the Council of Europe (CoE) on 17 July 2001 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], 2023). Then, on 28 December 2001, the Constitutional Law "On the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Azerbaijan" was adopted by the MM, and in 2002, Elmira Suleymanova¹² was one of the three candidates presented by H. Aliyev for the post of Ombudsman (Ombudsman, 2013).

On the other hand, the State Committee on Women's Issues was changed by the Decree of President Ilham Aliyev dated 6 February 2006 and established as the State Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs (E-qanun, 2006a). At the same time, the Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs of the MM was established in 2015 as the Committee of the MM for the 5th term to deal with draft laws and resolutions on the formation and implementation of state policy on family, women, and children's issues (SCFWCA, 2020: 6). Although previously the women's movement was in the pursuit of women's freedom, now women's issues have begun to be viewed within the framework of the family in the form of domestic violence, the situation of the mother in the family.

In general, among the steps taken to develop the legal framework after independence on 18 October 1991, documents in the field of women's rights and gender equality have an important place (SCFWCA, 2020, s. 6):

- Resolution of the MM dated 30 June 1995 "On Accession to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" (E-qanun, 1995);
- Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 14 January 1998 No. 727 "On measures to increase the role of women in Azerbaijan".
- Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 6 March 2000 No. 289 "On the implementation of the State Women's Policy in the Republic of Azerbaijan" (E-qanun, 2000a);
- Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers dated 26 September 2000 No. 176 on the implementation of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 6 March 2000 No. 289 "On the implementation of the State Women's Policy in the Republic of Azerbaijan" (E-qanun, 2000b);
- Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of 2000 on approval of the "National Action Plan on Women's Issues of the Republic of Azerbaijan" (E-qanun, 2000d);
- Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 10 October 2010 No. 150-IIIQ "On Ensuring Gender (Male and Female) Equality" (E-qanun, 2006b);
- Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 22 June 2010 No. 1058-IIIQ "On Prevention of Domestic Violence" (E-qanun, 2010).

¹² E. Suleymanova was honored by the University of Rochester in America as one of the 100 Heroic Women who are advocates and role models for women and girls and ranked among the leaders of not only Azerbaijan but also the women's movement around the world.

These laws paved the way for the establishment of the legal basis of women's rights and gender policy in Azerbaijan. One of the best examples is the "Law on Ensuring Gender (Male and Female) Equality" which its purpose is to "ensure gender equality by eliminating all forms of discrimination based on sex and by creating equal opportunities for women and men in political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres of public life" (E-qanun, 2006b). At the same time, Article 2.0.2 of the Law defines gender equality as "equal rights of women and men and equal opportunities for the realization of these rights and social equality in society". The other articles of the law are designed to create the situation of equal opportunities for women and men and social equality in society. This includes Article 5 on the state policy to ensure gender equality, the documents required for this purpose and the promotion of gender culture, Article 6¹³ on the measures taken by the state to fulfill its duties to ensure gender equality, and Article 17¹⁴ on the compensation of persons discriminated against on the grounds of sex (E-qanun, 2006b).

In Azerbaijan, there are five main problems where gender inequality is observed, and which are the most fundamental of women's problems. These problems are stated in the "State Program on Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development in the Republic of Azerbaijan 2008-2015" (E-qanun, 2008):

- *Early marriages;*
- *Gender-based violence;*
- *Women working in relatively low-paid areas in the labour market;*
- *Lack of childcare services;*
- *Poor representation of women at the decision-making level.*

Among the nine main strategic objectives and indicators of the program, the eighth is the promotion of gender equality. When these problems are analyzed separately, indicators such as women's participation rate of 4% among the heads of central executive structures in 2007, 11.2% among the members of parliament in 2005, 4.08% among the members of municipalities in 2004, and 16% among the judges in 2007 led to the target of increasing the level of women's participation in decision-making processes by the end of 2015 (E-qanun, 2008).

The high number of unregistered early marriages constitutes another problem. Since early marriages are not registered by the state, statistics are not kept, but it is possible to estimate the number of children born to women between the ages of 15-17. In 2011, 4392 children were born to women aged 15-17, and 2320 children were born in 2019 (SCFWCA, 2020: 21-22). At the same time, 2129 childbirths indicate approximately 3000 or 3500 child marriages. For this reason, Article 176-1 of the Criminal Code deals with the case of forcing women into marriage (E-qanun, 2011). According to the law, forcing a woman into marriage is punishable by a fine of 2000 manats to 3000 manats or imprisonment for up to two years, and forcing a child who has not reached the age of marriage into marriage is punishable by a fine from 3000 manats to 4000 manats or imprisonment up to four years.

On the other hand, the Criminal Code also mentions the consequences of violation of the right to equality. Article 154 of the Criminal Code on offenses against human rights and civil constitutional rights mentions violation of the right to equality (E-qanun, 2000c). According to the Law, harming the rights and legal interests of a person because of his/her race, nationality, religion, language, sex, origin, property status, service status, beliefs, membership to political parties, trade unions, and other public organizations is considered as a violation of the right to equality and is punishable by a fine.

Regarding the other important problem of gender-based violence, the "Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence" was adopted in 2010 (E-qanun, 2010). According to the law, 10 NGOs have been accredited by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection as assistance centers and started to assist domestic violence victims. At the same time, the "Clean World" organization in Baku and the "Tamas" organization in Ganja have started to operate as shelters in two cities. According to the statistics prepared by SCFWCA for 2019, more than 200 civil society organizations are active in the country for the protection of women's rights (SCFWCA, 2020: 46). However, despite this, according to the statistics of the Prosecutor General's Office, only in 2019, 1308 crimes related to domestic violence were committed

¹³ This article states that measures should be taken to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on sex, to ensure equal opportunities for women and men, and to ensure that representatives of one sex are not favored in state administration and decision-making (E-qanun, 2006b).

¹⁴ Workers who are sexually harassed are compensated by the employer (E-qanun, 2006b).

and 1358 people were recognized as victims of these crimes, including 1038 women, 1 pregnant woman and 12 minor girls who did not reach the age of adulthood (Genprosecutor, 2019).

Meanwhile, Article 7 of the Decree of President I. Aliyev dated 29 December 2012 No. 800 on the Development Concept “Azerbaijan 2020: looking to the future” includes a section on ensuring gender equality and family development (E-qanun, 2012). In addition, following the “Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities” ratified by the International Labour Organization (ILO), social protection of mothers and children, facilitating childcare for working mothers and fathers, increasing the number of day-care centers, and improving family planning services were also prioritized in the decree. As can be seen, women’s roles as mothers and wives in the family institution are emphasized.

On 25 September 2015, Azerbaijan adopted the “UN Agenda for Sustainable Development to 2030” (UN, 2023b). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a global call to action to end poverty, protect the environment and climate, and restore peace and security for people. After that on 6 October 2016, the Decree on the establishment of the National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development was signed (President, 2016). In this decree was mentioned that the promotion and achievement of gender equality is taken into account in the “State Programme for poverty reduction and economic development in the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2003-2005” and “State Programme for poverty reduction and sustainable development in 2008-2015”.

In addition to official decisions and laws, women’s issues are also addressed in the Parliament. The round table on “The role of Azerbaijani women in society” was organized on 8 March 2010 with the participation of members of the MM, intellectuals, and the heads of organizations aiming to deal with women’s issues such as “The Democratic Women’s World” Union, “Clean World” Women’s Aid Union, “Azeri-Turkish” Women’s Union, “Women of the XXI Century” Union (Aladdinkızı & Ismayılzade, 2010: 8-9). Looking at the activities of the listed NGOs, it is observed that their activities do not yield sufficient results to eliminate these problems.

Women’s Visibility in Politics and Administration in Azerbaijan

First of all, looking at the ratio of the population, it is seen that in the first half of the 20th century in Azerbaijan, men outnumbered women, but after the Second World War, these statistics changed (The State Statistical Committee [STAT], 2023b). The reason for that was the repression during the war and the large number of casualties of men. As a result, since the second half of the century, the proportion of women has been higher than that of men, but in the last 40 years, the gap between women and men has been relatively decreasing. According to the World Bank, 52 percent of Azerbaijan’s population in 1999 and 50.7 percent in 2021 will be women (WB, 2022).

According to the data, women are underrepresented in leadership positions in Azerbaijan, despite legal documents that emphasize the importance of increasing women’s participation in public administration and decision-making processes. In general, the lowest proportion of women in Parliament was observed in 1990 (4.3 percent)¹⁵ (STAT, 2023c). In the following years, although the number of women was practically the same, their ratio to men varied between 11 and 12 percent, with women constituting 16 percent of the members of Parliament after the 2010 parliamentary elections (20 women, 105 men) and 16.8 percent after the 2015 parliamentary elections (21 women, 104 men). Since parliamentary elections are held every five years, the last elections were held in 2020 and the proportion of women reached 18.2 percent (22 women, 97 men). In these elections, out of a total of 276 female candidates nominated by political parties, 22¹⁶ were elected (SCFWCA, 2020: 45). Based on the statistics given, it is possible to say that there has been no remarkable change in the representation rate of women in parliament in 30 years.

In addition to the low representation of women in the Parliament, there are no women chairs among those guiding the Parliament until 2020. In the first term (1995-2000) of Parliament, there were no women as either the chair or the assistant chairs, while in the 2nd term (2000-2005), 3rd term (2005-2010), 4th term (2010-2015) and 5th term (2015-2019) Parliamentary elections, there was 1 woman among the assistant chairs (SCFWCA, 2020: 27). As a result of the 6th term MM elections held for the first time on 9 February 2020, Sahiba Gafarova was elected as the woman Speaker of the MM (Majlis,

¹⁵ 15 women and 335 men

¹⁶ The most elected deputies were candidates of the NAP, Azerbaijan Umid Party (UMID), and Musavat Party (SCFWCA, 2020: 45).

2020). Although 15 committees, 2 commissions, and working groups on relations with the parliaments of more than 80 countries are active in the MM, only 1 woman was the chairperson of the committee in the MM in 4 terms between 1995-2015 and 2 in 2 terms between 2015-2020. There were no women among the chairpersons of committees. The committees that were chaired by women were the SCFWCA, the Human Rights Committee, and the Civilisation Committee.

After Zahra Guliyeva was appointed as the head of the State Committee on Women's Issues, on 14 January 1998, she paid special attention to the representation of women in all spheres, increasing women's participation, and women's issues at the local and international levels (SCFWCA, 2021a). The first Congress of Independent Azerbaijani Women held was the result of her work and efforts in 1998. Considering the speech of the next chairperson of the committee H. Huseynova at the III International Summit on Women and Justice held in Istanbul, Türkiye in 2018, it was observed that the issue of strengthening the family was given more importance than women's problems. In her speech on "Strengthening the Family," she emphasized that in Azerbaijan and Türkiye, the family institution is protected, family values are respected and widely supported, measures for the development of the family within the framework of the protection of human rights in Azerbaijan are given importance, care is taken to make decisions on the rights of women and children (SCFWCA, 2018).

Notwithstanding the low representation of women MPs in parliament, most local executive authorities have a female assistant chair (SCFWCA, 2020: 28). In 2013, this number was 35, while in 2019 this number reached 76. However, according to the statistical data for 2016-2019, there is only one female president among the heads of local executive authorities. To prevent the dominance of only one sex in the state administration, several projects have been implemented in the regions regarding women working, being members, and presiding in local government institutions and municipalities. One of them was the project "Women's Leadership in Local Government", organized from 2012 onwards in cooperation with SCFWCA and the "Women for Municipal Development" organization, with financial support from the United States Agency for International Development (SCFWCA, 2020: 26-27). The project aimed to inform people about CEDAW, encourage women candidates to participate in municipal elections, strengthen public opinion on women's leadership, and develop the country's gender policy. Meantime, SCFWCA and members of the municipality, together with the German International Cooperation Organisation, have implemented the "DAYAG" Mentoring Programme since 2012. Overall, a total of 2000 people benefited from the program in the period 2012-2017, resulting in an increase in the percentage of women members of the municipality from 4% in the municipal elections in 2004 to 39% in 2019.

In order to increase the activity and visibility of women in the public sphere and social networks, the project "Promoting the participation of women living in rural and regional areas in socio-economic life" was organized in cooperation with SCFWCA and the UN Development Programme (SCFWCA, 2020: 8;36). Within this framework, Women's Resource Centres were created in the regions of Azerbaijan. Only in 2011-2019, these centres were opened in 9 different cities.

When the visibility of women among the heads of parties is analyzed, it is observed that the figures are much lower. Since the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when parties began to be established in Azerbaijan, only Lala Shovkat and Saadat Muslimova have become party chairwomen. Founded in 1994, the "Azerbaijan Liberal Party" was created by L. Shovkat (Allahyarova & Mammadov, 2010: 19). However, in 2003, the party leaders resigned because it was thought that they might be the reason preventing the unification of the parties, and L. Shovkat was among the party leaders (Allahyarova & Mammadov, 2010: 31). Currently, the chairperson of the "Azad Mubarezlar" Party, founded in 2000, is S. Muslimova, while the others are headed by men only. According to the data of the Ministry of Justice for 2022, considering that 59 political parties with official state registration are operating in Azerbaijan, there are 58 male party chairmen for 1 female chairman (Justice, 2022). Apart from the deterioration of the gender equality ratio among party leaders, most of the officially registered parties do not even respond to social needs (Rehimli, 2020: 370). The inability of parties to respond to social needs is caused by their insufficient financial resources.

Gender Equality in Party Programs and International Official Data

Although women outnumber men according to Azerbaijani demographics, cases of gender discrimination in newborn babies are very common. In fact, Azerbaijan ranks second in the world for violation of the sex ratio (SCFWCA, 2020: 22). As a result of a sociological survey conducted among

men and women, 49.5 percent of men and 22.5 percent of women consider girls as a financial burden for the family (SCFWCA, 2020: 23). Since the 1990s, the proportion of boys has been increasing in proportion to the number of girls born. According to the data of the State Statistics Committee, while the number of boys per 100 girls was 107 in 1990, it was 116 in 2021 (STAT, 2023a).

Firstly, it should be noted that there was a political, economic, and social crisis in Azerbaijan in the 1980s, and organizations began to be created at the beginning of the 1990s with the popular movement that started in 1988 (New Azerbaijan Party [NAP], 2022). The NAP was established on 21 November 1992, and as the government's ruling party for 28 years, the following objectives were set for the achievement of gender equality and the development of the family institution (NAP, 1999):

- *Preventing cases of gender-based violence;*
- *Ensure equal opportunities for women and men in the labor market;*
- *Further expanding opportunities for women to be promoted at work and to hold leadership positions;*
- *Strengthen the social protection of mothers and children;*
- *Increase the number of kindergartens that meet modern requirements;*
- *Improve family planning services;*
- *Improve the monitoring system for cases of violence, truancy, and early marriage.*

In 1995, the Youth Union and the Women's Council were established within the NAP to expand the activities of young people and women. The Women's Council, in cooperation with SCFWCA, tried to implement several projects aimed at ensuring gender equality, increasing the effectiveness of women in the socio-political, socio-cultural life of the republic and the representation of women at the decision-making level (SCFWCA, 2020: 45-46). To implement these objectives, meetings were held in the regions, and booklets titled "Municipality and Women" were distributed to the public, a contest titled "Women are the pillars of our state, our independence, our present, our future" was held every year, and events dedicated to "11 October International Day of the Girl Child" were held in the Regional Administrative Authorities and secondary schools.

It is seen from the activities of the NAP; women are evaluated with their roles as mothers and wives within the family institution. As an example, it is possible to look at a round table on "Rights of workers with family responsibilities" jointly organized by the NAP and SCFWCA. In this meeting, based on the ILO's international laws No. 156 "Workers with family responsibilities: on equal treatment and equal opportunities for male and female workers" and 183 "On maternity protection", Azerbaijan joined in 2010, issues such as equality of women and men in the field of work, creating conditions for the health and safety of mother and child were discussed (SCFWCA, 2021b).

Except for the ruling party, most of the existing parties are power-orientated opposition parties and the competitiveness among the parties is weak. Insufficient financial resources of the parties also affect their active activity. However, the issue of gender equality can be found in the charter of the opposition Musavat. Among the main goals of Musavat, it is stated that "*the basis of Musavatism is the freedom and legal equality of all Azerbaijani citizens regardless of religion, nationality, social affiliation, sect or gender*" (Musavat, 2023b). Apart from this article, in which the protection of equality regardless of gender is stated as a goal, there is only one article in which women are mentioned. In this article, it is stated that at least 1/4 of the seats in all elected committees of the party are reserved for women.

The situation of gender inequality in Azerbaijan is also reflected in international data. Azerbaijan has been included in the "Global Gender Inequality Index" list published annually by the WEF since 2007 (The World Economic Forum [WEF], 2007). According to the Forum's report, Azerbaijan ranked 59th among 128 countries in 2007 in terms of gender inequality, but this rate has increased over the years. Although Azerbaijan's global gender inequality index has fluctuated significantly in recent years, a significant upward trend was observed when the periods between 2007-2022 were compared and ended with an index of 0.69 in 2022. This increase can be seen when analyzed according to the four indicators of the Global Gender Inequality Index. When these statistics are compared, Azerbaijan rose from 19th to 73rd place in terms of economic participation and opportunities, from 82nd to 93rd place in terms of education level, from 127th to 134th place in terms of health level, and from 85th to 113th place in terms of political participation level (WEF, 2007: 10-11; WEF, 2022: 88-89). These figures show the increase in gender inequality in the country over the years.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the women's movement, rights such as equal opportunities, education, and the right to vote were provided to Azerbaijani women before most Western countries and America. During the first women's movement, schools were opened, equal education rights for men and women were provided in the first university of Azerbaijan, and women were given the right to vote and be elected. These were realized when socialism was still dominant in the country before choosing a liberal democratic path. The struggle for women's rights and freedom was waged not only by women but also by the intellectuals of the period in Azerbaijan. The biggest problem of the period was that the remnants of feudal-patriarchal views were widespread in the population. To counter this, schools, vocational training centers, and clubs were opened, and women began to be educated and taught professions. The women of a country where they constituted a large part of the labour force in the workplace or fought alongside men in the war struggled for freedom at that time. However, when women fought against the headscarf, their movements resulted in serious obstacles, threats, even punishment, and death.

In the first Constitution of Democratic Azerbaijan, the article on equal rights and freedoms of women and men was included. Women were the first to be subjected to the abolition of the death penalty in the country. In addition, Azerbaijan's ratification of CEDAW, the organization of the Congress of Independent Azerbaijani Women, creation of the State Committee on Women's Issues were indicators of the development of the women's movement. It is possible to say that all this was considered when Azerbaijan was accepted as a full member of the CoE in 2001.

Even though Aliyevs took decisions on gender equality, joined international agreements, and organized state programs in accordance with them, the rate of gender inequality in Azerbaijan is at a high level. The reasons for the high level of gender inequality are problems such as early marriages, gender-based violence, women's low-paid work in the labour market, and lack of childcare services. Apart from governmental decisions, the activities of NGOs in the country show that there are more than 200 NGOs involved in the protection of women's rights. Although these NGOs work on the prevention of domestic violence, the number of women and girls among the victims of domestic violence in the country has not decreased. Azerbaijan ranks second in the world in terms of the violation of the gender ratio because of the preference given to boys by parents because girls are seen as a financial burden in newborn children. At the same time, although more than half of the country is made up of women, women are not given much place in politics and administration. The commissions chaired by women in the parliament are related to human rights and culture and the others are represented by men. The fact that the State Committee for Women's Issues was changed to SCFWCA is the first indication that the role of women as mothers and wives within the institution of the family has started to be emphasized rather than their problems as individuals. Unlike the other political parties of the country, in the program of NAP, ensuring gender equality is addressed with the development of the family institution. Although NAP tries to organize programs in cooperation with SCFWCA, no steps related to gender equality were found in the activities of other parties. The reason for this is that other parties do not have the financial resources to meet social needs.

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