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**AZERBAIJANI WOMEN IN THE FIRST 20 YEARS OF POST-SOVIET
TRANSITION PERIOD**

Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a historical moment for the fifteen former Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan, as they embarked on a journey of nation-building and identity formation. Post-Soviet Azerbaijan experienced a revival of pre-Soviet traditions, particularly in the realm of Islam, alongside a redefinition of national identity spearheaded by predominantly nationalist male elites. This process was intricately linked to the changing role of women in Azerbaijani society. While the Soviet era had seen efforts to empower women, including advancements in education and legal rights, the dissolution of the Union brought forth a renewed emphasis on Islam and traditional gender roles. This study analyzes the position of women in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, and underlines that it reveals a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and economic factors. It is aimed to show that Azerbaijani women navigate a unique path, blending secularism with Islamic values while adapting to changing socio-economic realities. The study is important because it emphasizes that while Azerbaijan grapples with the legacy of Soviet rule and navigates the challenges of transition, the evolving role of women emerges as a key determinant of future societal dynamics. Their experiences offer insights not only into the Azerbaijani context but also into broader discussions of gender, religion, and nation-building across former Soviet republics, particularly those with Muslim populations.

Keywords: Azerbaijani women, post-Soviet transition, women's emancipation, Muslim women, Azerbaijan.

**SOVYET SONRASI GEÇİŞ DÖNEMİNİN İLK 20 YILINDA
AZERBAYCAN'DAKİ KADINLAR**

Öz





1991 yılında Sovyetler Birliği'nin çöküşü, ulus inşası ve kimlik oluşumu yolculuğuna çıkan Azerbaycan'ın da aralarında bulunduğu on beş eski Sovyet cumhuriyeti için tarihi bir an oldu. Sovyet sonrası Azerbaycan, ağırlıklı olarak milliyetçi erkek elitlerin öncülüğünde ulusal kimliğin yeniden tanımlanmasının yanı sıra, özellikle İslam alanında Sovyet öncesi geleneklerin yeniden canlanmasını yaşadı. Bu süreç, Azerbaycan toplumunda kadının değişen rolüyle karmaşık bir şekilde bağlantılıydı. Sovyet döneminde eğitim ve yasal haklarda ilerlemeler de dahil olmak üzere kadınları güçlendirmeye yönelik çabalar görülürken, Birliğin dağılması İslam'a ve geleneksel cinsiyet rollerine yeniden vurgu yapılmasını beraberinde getirdi. Bu çalışma, Sovyet sonrası Azerbaycan'da kadınların konumunu analiz etmekte ve bunun kültürel, dini ve ekonomik faktörler arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmada Azerbaycanlı kadınların değişen sosyo-ekonomik gerçeklere uyum sağlarken laikliği İslami değerlerle harmanlayarak benzersiz bir yolda ilerlediğini göstermek amaçlanmıştır. Çalışma, Azerbaycan'ın Sovyet yönetiminin mirasıyla boğuşurken ve geçiş döneminin zorluklarıyla baş ederken, kadınların gelişen rolünün gelecekteki toplumsal dinamiklerin temel belirleyicisi olarak ortaya çıktığını vurgulaması açısından önem arz etmektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, Sovyet sonrası deneyimleri yalnızca Azerbaycan bağlamında değil, aynı zamanda eski Sovyet cumhuriyetlerinde, özellikle de Müslüman nüfusa sahip olanlarda cinsiyet, din ve ulus inşasına ilişkin daha geniş tartışmalara da ışık tutması açısından önemlidir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Azerbaycanlı kadınlar, Sovyet sonrası geçiş dönemi, kadınların özgürleşmesi, Müslüman kadınlar, Azerbaycan

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the emergence of fifteen former Soviet republics. These republics had been going through a transition process since then. In this process, pre-Soviet traditions and habits have been gaining importance to establish their nation states and national identity. In this respect, Azerbaijan is no exception among Muslim countries of the former Soviet Union in terms of experiencing revival of Islam. Kapteijns states that under the Soviet regime, especially in Stalin's era, Islam was repressed and more egalitarian gender roles in the areas of basic health and education, legal rights, participation in waged labor and politics was emphasized. So, there was a legacy of empowerment of women when the Union collapsed. However, emancipation of women being held by alien rule gave rise to the emphasis on Islam and women's role as symbolic representatives of cultural authenticity and traditional morality after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Kapteijns 1998).

Tohidi points out that in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, people have been experiencing a period of establishing national identity. In this nation-building attempt, predominantly nationalist and male Azeri elite have been trying to redefine the national identity in the country. One of the objects of this process is the role of women in society (Tohidi 2000). In addition to that, post-Soviet economic decline in the country has direct effects on women's





situation. As Baguirov points out, transition to a market economy has created considerable setbacks in the situation of women in the country (Sabi 1999).

After seventy years of experience of Soviet rule, post-Soviet countries had to deal with the challenges of the transition period. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, fifteen constituent states were expected to establish a market economy, build a secular state, and achieve to create their nation states. Each one of these tasks was difficult to achieve for these countries. Due to space problems, the main focus of this paper is on the nation building process of Azerbaijan. In this article, the changing position of women in the transition period is examined because redefinition of women's role in Azerbaijan is an integral part of national identity creation and nation building process. In this respect, revival of the religion of Islam and economic decline that Azerbaijan had faced constitutes the main points of analysis.

1. Azerbaijani women under Soviet rule

As a socialist regime, the Soviet Union was expected to equalize women with men in all spheres of life. Sabi argues that when the Soviet Union came to power, the belief was that women working outside the home will eliminate the oppression of women. The Communist regime promised to bring equality between men and women. Participation of women in the labor force started very quickly after the introduction of central planning. Women labor force was necessary for the survival of the system, and they were encouraged to work by guaranteeing them the right to equal pay for equal work. Also, extensive provision of day care centers encouraged women to enter the labor force. In Azerbaijan, two stages of policy were implemented toward women; secularization of family laws and campaign of liberate women in the 1920s. These policies aimed at bringing Azeri women up to the level of proletarian Russian women in all areas, to provide equality among all workers. The high level of literacy, existence in co-educational institutions, and educational achievements of Azeri women were the remarkable achievements of them. However, despite women constituting 43% of the employees in the overall national economy of Azerbaijan in 1989, women were still seen as housewives. So, there was inconsistency between actual involvement of women in the labor force and emancipation of women (Sabi 1999: 113).

The Zhenotdel, an official part of Communist Party of Women, of the Azerbaijan Communist Party was established in 1920 in Baku. It opened a women's club, established literacy courses, prepared the cadres working among women, and spread political literacy among women (Heyat 2002). Tohidi points out that the visible steps were taken during the first years of Soviet era in terms of socialization of Azeri women. The Soviet regime successfully combined the traditional, indigenous formats with the modern mechanisms through women's clubs, delegates meetings, conferences, journals, literacy and vocational schools, and organs of Communist Party, especially the Women's department-Zhenotdel





(1999). Moreover, Azeri women had enjoyed legal emancipation in the 1980s. Muslim women in Soviet Azerbaijan achieved a high level of university literacy, non-segregated education and remarkable educational attainment. In the spheres of politics and government, women were represented with high numbers, thanks to the quota system. In scientific fields, cultural scenes and music, several women emerged (Tohidi 1999: 150). So, the rapid and functioning reforms for the equalization and emancipation of women have been started, and more and more women have become visible in all areas of life. The Soviet Union seemed to have both ideological and pragmatic reasons behind these reforms and policies on women. The government both aimed at women being part of the labor force, and equal citizens; the latter aim was important for the logic of Socialist state trying to make an equal Soviet person real.

Tohidi mentions that the Soviet state, especially in the Stalinist era, speeded up the modernization process based on heavy and military industrial growth. This development called on women to be an active part of social production. But, as she states, “the need for high quality childcare, labor-saving household appliances, food cycle technology, and daily consumer goods, for example, did not constitute priorities for the state” (Tohidi 1999: 69). This situation created a double burden for women, as housewives and as workers. Also, despite women constituting over 65% of primary and secondary educators, 45% of total urban industrial women workers were concentrated in the lower paid, lower rank, and lower skill grades. Throughout the Soviet Union, average earnings of women are assumed to be 30% lower than those of males (Tohidi 1999).

Heyat states that in the 1930s, women were doing better not only in the field of education and employment, but also in many qualitative aspects of their lives such as rights in marriage and divorce, freedom of dress and association with men. As a part of the developing Soviet state and its women, relatively rapid unveiling in the 1920s was a symbolic act of emancipation and gaining equality, emphasis made on women participation in industry and education. By the end of the first decade of revolution, the new roles defining Soviet women were an equal citizen, a loyal worker, and a devoted mother and wife. In Azerbaijan, women’s servicing role in the home is emphasized, proving gender division of domestic labor (Heyat 2002). So, in the public area, the attempts of the Soviet government to equalize women with men do not seem to be achieved in the private sphere.

As a Communist state, the official rhetoric of the Soviet regime in terms of religion was atheism. In this respect, not only Islam, but also all religious beliefs were under harsh repression of the Soviet government. Although some soft policies could have been promoted regarding religious affairs in accordance with the needs of the time during the Soviet era, most of the time religion was seen as the enemy of the Communist state. After the Bolshevik Revolution, obstacles that Islam encountered have increased in Azerbaijan. Mosques and religious institutions were closed. This resulted in privatization and domestication of religion





(Tohidi 1999). Shari'a and adat courts, dealing with domestic and religious matters, were diminished. During World War II, to mobilize to and get support from Turkic people, the policy toward religion changed slightly. In 1944, the Spiritual Department of Muslims of the Transcaucasus was restored, headed by a Shi's with a Sunni-deputy (Valiyev 2005). However, throughout the decades, religious knowledge was limited, religious ideas were suppressed, and the meaning of being Muslim has changed over time. And, as Gasimoglu points out in Cornell's article, "the reason for the rise of Islam in Azerbaijan is the downfall of the atheist ideology after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the aspirations by the local people for the restoration of their lost values, including religious ones" (2006: 24). Therefore, the revival of Islam as a part of national identity is not a surprise for Muslim countries after 1991.

Bedford argues that restricting and controlling the religion had its own short term and long term consequences. In the short run, repression of religion and clergy resulted in Muslim peoples' being impoverished by Islamic knowledge, literature and education. In the long run, these countries experienced Islamic boom after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bedford 2009). The turning back to the pre-Communist past affected, also, the religious revival in the country. Regardless of its impact and the degree of radicalism, this revival has certain impacts on the position of women in Azerbaijan.

During the Soviet era, some practices like visiting shrines, paying alms and fitre had remained alive, while the wording of namaz was forgotten. Shi'a sources of religious identity resulted in confusion in terms of belonging to religion. In 1920s and 1930s, Azeri children were getting atheist education, while at home they observed their parents and grandparents performing religious rituals. Today, many women in the country remember the times of their grandmothers' wearing headscarves, performing Islamic rituals, and fasting (Heyat 2008).

Joseph and Najmabadi state that the Soviet government equated women as a surrogate proletariat in class war, and as a tool for war against religion. Despite great visibility in the public sphere, women' their own conception about being a citizen did not change. According to authors, Soviet campaigns on women failed, because they defeminized the women (2005). Among the attitudes and practices that may be seen as Islamic mores and rituals, the ones associated with gender roles, sexuality, and life cycles maintained their relevance in Soviet Azerbaijan. Those related to male circumcision, sex-segregated mourning ceremonies, and means of testifying to a bride's virginity on her wedding night, for example, might actually have been local customs preceding or superseding Islam but popularly viewed as Islamic (Tohidi 1999). So, the view of religion seems to be combined with tradition.

Azerbaijani women went through a period of empowerment and repression during Soviet rule, influenced by the larger political situation in the USSR. The Soviet government initially pushed for gender equality as part of its beliefs, aiming to include women in the workforce and public life. This was shown through the creation of organizations like





Zhenotdel, which worked to protect women's rights and encourage their participation in areas like education and jobs. However, the Soviet approach to gender equality didn't give women real power. Even though women were present in political roles, they were often left out of important decisions, with men holding the more powerful positions in the Communist Party and government (Tohidi 1997). This showed the limits of Soviet policies, which, while supporting women's rights in theory, didn't change the patriarchy in Azerbaijani society.

2. Post-Soviet Nation-building process: Revival of Islam and Changing Position of Women

2.1. Nation-building Process

In the first two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani women played an important role in shaping the nation and its identity. This time was influenced by an overlapping of economic, religious, and social factors that affected both the country's national identity and the role of women in society.

The nation-building and identity construction process of Azerbaijani women after the collapse of the Soviet Union is a complex issue in terms of cultural revival, socio-political challenges, and changing gender roles. The transition from Soviet rule to independence marked a significant shift in the national narrative, influencing women's identities in various ways.

Nation-building in Azerbaijan was strongly influenced by two ideas: Azerbaijanism and Turkism. Both ideas aimed to create a national identity separated from the Soviet past. Ergun points out that these ideas were key in shaping the national identity, focusing on the importance of cultural and historical stories in the post-Soviet era (Ergun 2021). Women played many different roles in this process; they were not only part of social and political movements but also they were the symbols of the new national identity. Their involvement in public life, especially in education and cultural activities, was important for building national pride and unity. In that period, Azerbaijan faced a critical period of nation-building characterized by the revival of national symbols and cultural practices.

The first two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were important for building Azerbaijan's national identity and defining the role of women in the process. Economic, religious, and social factors led the way to a complex environment where Azerbaijani women shaped their identities while facing the challenges of the nation-building process. Their contributions were key in changing both gender roles and national identity, showing the importance of including diverse perspectives in understanding how a nation is built.

The achievements of women in Azerbaijan were impressive among the countries of Muslim world. They were in a good position in terms of education, employment, primary





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health, and legal rights. But, their emancipation was disrupted by contradictions and duality. Since 1991, identity formation based on gender has been going on in the country under the name of nation-building process. Identity markers of Azerbaijan have been gaining importance to erase the Soviet past and identity. Azeri women' being described with dressing or Muslim labels has been a part of this process (Tohidi 1997). What is seen here is the gender-based revival of the nation. In this context, women are standing between the new nation and Soviet past, as a breaking line between them.

Azerbaijan has been encountering with the similar stages that of former Socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, such as: deteriorating living standards for many women, men and children; increasing and disproportional unemployment and poverty among women; the rising "cult of domesticity;" a decreasing women's presence in government and formal politics; and, to a lesser extent, commercialization of sex (Tohidi 1997). In the process of revival of traditional, individual, national and cultural values, Azerbaijani people were digging the backyard for establishing their future in the light of the past. By doing so, women have been attached to traditional, cultural, and religious roles, different from Soviet women. Tohidi explains the three models that are exposed to women;

"the Russian- Soviet, but more so, post-Soviet model, still fluid and confusing, still perceived with ambivalence; the Western model offered through Western media, especially the neighboring Turkish TV and movie industry which is seen as emancipated and appealing, yet controversial and morally questionable; and the veiled Islamic model, offered through the neighboring Iranian media and to a lesser extent through" (Tohidi 1997: 161)

As a crossroad of different cultures, different empires and states throughout the history, and as a geopolitically important country, Azerbaijan is open to the influences from different cultures and countries. However, this does not mean that the Azerbaijani people will follow one of them as a role model in the transition period, while creating their own identity. Of course, some interaction with other parts of the world, and some cultural and traditional values will influence who Azeri women are, but this is not an obstacle to the creation of unique identity formation in the country.

The question of how Azerbaijani womanhood is defined is answered successfully by Sabir Mamedov, a male journalist and historian, like that;

"The Azeri woman has differed and will differ from all these proposed models. She differs from the Iranian woman for she does not wear the veil; she is better educated, more modern and European. But she is also distinct from the Turkish woman. Unlike Azerbaijan, there is a very wide urban-rural discrepancy in Turkey as many rural women are left secluded and uneducated. On the other hand, some of the modern urban women, for example in Istanbul, are too loose and immodest (achikh sachikh). I do not





like the way women are presented in Turkish movies or on Turkish TV as primarily naked objects of advertisements. That is not the proper way to treat women. But in Azerbaijan, the urban-rural variation is small, and women have preserved their modesty (ismat). This is due to our old tradition, inherited from our grandfathers, which upholds a great respect for women. It is true that in the past and in the name of religion, our women were deprived of their rights, but in the family, women have always enjoyed the highest respect. We have a saying that "man is the pillar (dirak) and woman is the heart (yurak) of the family" (Tohidi 1997: 162).

2.2. Economic Situation of Azerbaijani Women after the collapse of Soviet Union

Economically, the transition from a Soviet-style economy to a market-oriented system posed significant challenges for Azerbaijani women. In the post-Soviet era, women emerged as key players in the informal economy, often taking on roles that contributed to household survival and community resilience (Jilavyan 2022). This economic participation was crucial in redefining gender roles and expectations within the context of national identity formation. One of the most important factors that had an effect on the position of women in Azerbaijan is economic condition. It is obvious that the collapse of the Soviet Union hit the economies of former Soviet states. Azerbaijan is no exception to it. But, the most affected fraction in the society seems to be women. Tohidi suggests that women have been in hazardous situations in the working area. The survey conducted in 1991 illustrates this argument; according to the survey, only half of the working women are satisfied with their jobs. Also, over employment of women is another issue. They are both expected to fulfill household work, and earn money for their family, which creates a double burden for them. Najafizadeh states that regardless of gender; all people were affected from economic decline in the country, from the conflict in Karabakh, and from reduction of social security. In addition to that, women, also, were given the responsibility of family caretaking and pursue the economic activity in the family. State was no longer providing health care or child caring services, so poverty has been rising in the country in the transition period. The number of poor families has dramatically increased in the post-Soviet era. Although the Constitution declares equality between men and women, employment and caregiving are gendered. The women have mostly engaged in care giving sectors such as teaching, social work, and health services, where the salaries declined. Also, in terms of education, as people got poorer, they had difficult times to fund the education of their children, and the ones mostly affected became the girls. To earn money for their family, the women also were engaged in illegal works such as self-employed, home-based works, as street and market vendors, as small scale farmers, and day workers. In the other scenario, the husband migrating to other regions to find a job has left the responsibility of all family to the wife (Najafizadeh 2003).





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For macroeconomic stability and price liberalization, Azerbaijan experienced many reforms since 1991. However, the economy suffered from a decline in output. Moreover, due to the falling number of child-raising facilities in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, women were expected to take care of their children. Women were expected to shop, obtain daily necessities, prepare food, and do household jobs. Daily household takes 6 to 8 hours a day. So, it is not unexpected that women' participation in the labor force dropped heavily. In 1994, only 22% of the women of working age participated in the labor force. In addition to that, there has been a widening gap between the unemployment rate of men and women. It is suggested that liberalization of the economy has been affecting women more and more (Sabi 1999).

Moreover, Heyat underlines that lack of official doctrine about gender equality, legal rights has led to the creation of a traditional system in the definition of women, while eliminating the equal, educated, and working women image created by the Soviet government. Well educated young women are now encountering the difficulties to find a job. Both economic situation and knit relationship played a role in that. Also, the majority of women are under pressure of returning home and traditions (Heyat 2006).

Habibov summarizes that the cost of transition was huge and devastating for the country. In 1995, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country dropped to 34% of its GDP in 1989. Fiscal deficit of the country increased to 12% of GDP. The prices increased in 1995 by 23,000 times as compared to 1990. Also, expenditures on household consumption dropped to 45% of its level in the 1990s. 44 In 2002, decline in the living standards led women to be engaged more in the household works, or low-waged jobs. In transition countries, it is a trend that women are concentrated in more state-run sectors. So, they constituted the majority of employees in social services, health, and education fields. In 2005, even in low-paid sectors, salaries of women constituted 54.4% of men's salaries. Privatization also negatively affected women (Habibov 2010: 57).

This economic deterioration of women has many consequences. One of them is what Heyat calls the 'sex business' which is getting attraction from Iranian, Turkish and Arab businessmen who enjoyed greater buying power than local men. The level of prostitution has not reached the level in Russia, and Slavic countries, but there is an increasing level of street prostitution (Heyat 2006).

2.3. Socio-Political Life of Women under the Revival of Islam

The economic decline and insecure environment throughout the country has led the way to the need for male protection. Gender biased politics were increased. Ethnicity, regionalism, and religion have been seen as sources of the national identity in the country. There is a returning of women into private and domestic spheres of life. Women are expected to be moral, tradition and culture carriers of the new nation. In the absence of the Soviet Union,





people in Azerbaijan have turned to their families as reliable institutions, so the family was seen as the most stable and conservative institution in Azerbaijan. One indicator of this is divorce rate being one of the lowest ones (Tohidi 1999). Women with high education and presence in the public sphere may surprise the outsider when seeing the hierarchical structure of family and male domination. Heyat indicates that in the post-Soviet period, gender norms and position of women in Azerbaijan, also, stand between the impact of Western ideology, and Islamic perception of females. Even young women who have entered the labor force were expected to be pursuing their traditions and family values. The economic decline after 1991 and collapse of the Union strengthened the reliance on family members as a primary source of personal networks, and employment opportunities. Even skilled and educated young people in Azerbaijan need to have close knit family relations to find a job (Heyat 2006).

Interestingly enough, women' perception about changing family roles, rising expectations to be carriers of family morality and domination over women do not necessarily have negative consequences for some women in Azerbaijan. They, of course, know what they live better than anyone. According to Azeri Professional women, Pusta Azizbekova, a prominent academician in her seventies and director of the Azerbaijan Museum of History:

“Women's apparent subservient or male-dominated position is exactly that: apparent. . . . Why not? Like Russian and Western women, we enjoy equal rights and legal protection. But we feel even more privileged as, in addition to what they have, we also enjoy the respect, pampering and protection we receive from our men and families. I enjoy having men open doors and wait for me to enter, pay the bill when we go out, and shelter me when we walk in streets and public places. What is wrong with that?” (Tohidi 1999: 88).

Sabi, moreover, underlines that when the Soviet Union dissolved; women became more and more invisible in politics. In the Soviet era, women consisted 39% of the Supreme of Azerbaijan; this percentage dropped to 6% in 1995. Also, with the household related works' being attached to the women in transition period decreased their representation in administrative and political areas. In addition to that, after the elimination of the quota system in the Soviet system, the appearance of women in the political scene has dropped. Women's presence in the first years of perestroika was only 4.8 % (Tohidi 1999: 92).

Anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union could not achieve to minimize the experiential and ritual dimensions of Islam. In Soviet Azerbaijan, Islamic rituals related to gender roles have been kept alive. And, this ritual-based system did not shift to an ideological base in the post-Soviet period. Ethnicity, language, regionalism and Islam can be listed as sources of national identity, as mentioned above. A woman in Azerbaijan, also, is valued with physical beauty, advanced education, self-sacrificing, motherhood, and serving to his husband. These attitudes are the separating points of them from Soviet women. And, these





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roles led women to think that they can enjoy power in the territory of home (Bodman and Tohidi 1998).

Bedford states that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious beliefs were reborn. Reading the Quran may be satisfying for the older generation, but now, the new generation started to be engaged in religious communities. The interviews that the author conducted in Abu Bakr and Juma showed that Islamic revival is a recent thing, as a result of great decisiveness. This claim was also shown in the research done by Gureyeva on veiled women in Azerbaijan in 2003. Most respondents were wearing veils for 2-3 years, as a search for stability, security under conflict, lack of unemployment, and fragile political situation (Bedford 2009). The issue of hijab is debatable in the country. Ban on women from wearing the headscarf in photographs on all identity documents, driver's licenses and internal passports affected the controversial process. Gureyeva describes the choice of women to wear veil with these words "distinguish themselves by choice of an alternative lifestyle different from their parents, who have been influenced very much by the communist ideology". Another girl declared: "my parents do not allow me to fast or to wear the hijab. Their opinion is inherited from Soviet times. They think we [in the Abu Bakr mosque] are fanatics. People here think that the hijab is for old people only. But I don't care. I have found the goal in my life" (Bedford 2009: 133-135). However, there are many young women who dress like Western women, and live their lives with some degree of freedom, but this does not mean that traditional values were undermined. Mark Elliot's guidebook to Azerbaijan notes argues that visitors can be misguided by the short skirts worn by women, because most of them still had to return home before nine, and were upset about their family values (Bedford 2009).

Islamic revival is a fact but Azerbaijan as one of the secular Islamic societies has met very limited radical ideologies. The first Muslim country to have operas, theaters, and democratic republic, even before the Bolshevik Revolution, has witnessed the rise of secular intelligentsia. This trend continued after 1991. Although Islamic revival took place in the first years of independence, this has been related to the reconnection of traditional values. Radical groups remained weak. In the absence of strong political movements emphasizing the role of religion, secularism in the country has continued to evolve. The majority of the population is secular in the country, however, one cannot ignore the fact that Islamic fraction has been growing (Bedford 2009).

As Valiyev indicates, knowledge on the religion is low in Azerbaijan. After independence, new mosques were opened, visits to the Holy places were freed, and religious educational institutions were built. Although this revival of religion, and although people in Azerbaijan considers Islam as a part of national identity, secularism was emphasized by the majority of the population, and radicalization or politicization of Islam did not take place. As a consequence of this situation, Azerbaijani people do not even know which sect of the Islam





they belong to. It is underlined that “Even more surprisingly to observers of more strongly Islamic countries, many Azerbaijanis have difficulties identifying themselves with either of the branches of Islam” (2005: 21).

Heyat, also, states in her book that because of the above -mentioned economic decline and increasing feeling of insecurity due to the Karabakh conflict, the country is fertile for Islamic movements. However, the seventy year presence of the Soviet Union, and the secular mind of Azeri people has led the way to the revival of folk Islam rather than radical movements. There is still ignorance of Islam, as the contents of Qur’an, and not much interest in rediscovering the shrines or visiting the holy places. Gender norms and relations seem to be preserving ethnic and national identities (Heyat 2002).

In the post-Soviet era, ideological vacuum resulted in the promotion of Islam. However, by the end of 1990s, activities of religious groups were restricted, two official bodies were established to control these activities; the State Committee for Religious Affairs and the Caucasus Muslim Board (Heyat 2008).

Women generally do continue to play their prescribed roles in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, but there are certain new distinctions. Although they do not seem to shun the assignment of cultural and national representation, they are seeking to expand, redefine, and subvert the parameters of Azeri authenticity and Islamic heritage. This is perhaps the most challenging era for them. The state is not economically and legally as supportive of women's social and productive roles as it had been in the Soviet past, nor is free market rules female friendly. Moreover, Islam is no longer only a matter of private life to be preserved and practiced mainly by women. It is becoming increasingly politicized in the hands of men and rival political entrepreneurs at both the national and regional levels and is being manipulated in accordance with or in reaction to the exigencies of the new capitalistic realities or the old patriarchal gender arrangements (Tohidi 1999).

Heyat indicates that the increase in the number of veiled women does not mean that there is a return to the old tradition of veiling in the country. This is a choice of women based on many reasons. Mostly, Islamic way of dressing serves to get a greater degree of mobility in the public arena and freedom from male dominance. As Ask and Tjomsland states; “today’s Islamic dress ... ‘reflects innovation made by the younger generation of women who use change of clothing to accentuate their identity and response to a changing world, ...” (Heyat 2008: 366).

Especially young people who are Europe oriented socially and culturally. It is visible that young women wear Western style clothes in the country. Educated young women knowing Western languages and enjoying freedom from their fathers and husbands have many opportunities (Heyat 2008). Women are visible in the spheres of art and literature, but there are a limited number of women in the high level positions of power and authority (El-





solh and Mabro 1994). In addition to their visibility in the public arena, and have opportunities, women are active in terms of civil society organizations. Since 1991, in the transition period, more than 20 Azeri women's advocacy associations have been functioning, for strengthening the social, economic and political transition (Najafizadeh 2003).

However, despite the restrictive role of religion on women is less visible in Azerbaijan than other Muslim countries, traditional female roles stayed alive in the country. Especially in the rural parts, women being in the public without accompaniment, smoking in public, driving automobiles can be subject to disapproval. But, many women have engaged in the labor force, less of them appeared in administrative areas (Federal Research Division 2004).

Heyat indicates that there is a battle between modern and tradition with the Islamic revival. In her field study, one of her correspondents, a 19 year old young woman, states that she wanted to wear a veil, but her family did not approve of it and asked her why do you go clock back. She states that veiling is an unsympathetic thing in the country, and those in veils confront discrimination in employment, getting passports, and identity cards. But, she thinks that veiling gives her respect from men. As Heyat points out, the reasons behind the choice of veiling for women are confidence, respect, freedom, and purity. Azeri youth are turning to veiling, also, because of fear of Allah. They perceive atheism as their parents' generation, and want to differentiate themselves from their parents. The most challenging ones are middle-generation women, who are in the middle of the Soviet era and transition era. They are really confused. Veiling is the most visible consequence of the rise of Islam. Heyat continues to argue that, The veil, in its modern, non-traditional form and usage has acquired symbolic meaning that signifies women as bearers of national identity and moral standards, expressing their protest against western consumerist culture (Heyat 2008).

Conclusion

Dragadze points out that there are four approaches to study the position of women in transition. The first one is called the "apologetica" approach, suggesting that women have hidden power and authority despite restrictive ideals of Islam on women in Muslim society, and they are not oppressed as might appear. Also, they do not see themselves as oppressed. The second one is called the "universalist" approach, suggesting that men always interpret holy books with their own perception, and oppression on women is a universal phenomenon. The third one is the "reluctant conclusion" approach, arguing that Islam promotes segregation and oppression on women with a harsh line against women. The last one is the "orientalist" approach, arguing that women living in accordance with the Islamic rules are different from others, especially Western women (El-solh and Mabro 1994).





Under the light of what this paper underlines, women in Azerbaijan seem to be the sum of these approaches. They are certainly fit for an apologetic approach, because they really think that they have authority and power especially in their families. What the Universalist approach argues may be true, but this is simply the power relation between men and women, not necessarily due to Islamic values, and traditions. In terms of a reluctant conclusion approach, what may arise in Azerbaijan is the misinterpretation of Islam, but overall, this does not seem to be a big problem in this country. And, as orientalist approach suggests, Azeri women are different from their Western partners, both because of being Muslim country, and experiencing Soviet rule in the past. It can be claimed that women in Azerbaijan are unique in terms of being secular and aware of the women's question even before the Bolshevik Revolution, their ties with Islam hardly seems to be in radicalized or extremist form in the post-Soviet era. Revival of Islam is mostly related with the return to the traditional way of life, differentiating themselves from their parents, and enjoying more freedom and respect from men. But, they are just general assumptions about the role of women in the nation building process. Differences in the positions of women can be seen even in the same city, or town. This is a very natural thing because; it is much more related to the family structure. Also, economic decline in the country has a really huge effect on the role of women in the transition period. The increasing importance of family, and duties related to womanhood after the collapse of the Soviet Union pushed women into new roles and made them the engine of both economic transition, and nation building process. Gender based revival of nation is more visible than religion based revival of nation.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was an important turning point for the newly independent republics, including Azerbaijan. This change gave power to the old traditions and the things that are identified with the national identity of Azerbaijan, especially with the revival of Islam. During Soviet rule, the Soviet government initially promoted gender equality, bringing women into the workforce and public life, leading to progress in education and legal rights for women. However, this empowerment was often only on the surface, in theory, so women were still mainly expected to keep their traditional roles at home, even though they played a big part in the labor force.

As Azerbaijan faced the challenges of the nation-building process after 1991, the revival of Islam became closely connected to shaping the national identity and the roles of women. There was a return to traditional gender roles, and women became the symbols of cultural authenticity and protectors of the nation's identity. In this transition era, the rough economic conditions faced by Azerbaijani families often pushed women into domestic roles,





leading to the emergence of old expectations and limiting their participation in public and political life.

The revival of Islam in Azerbaijan became an important part of the nation building process because it presented a new ideology for the women to define themselves with. The rise of religious identity gave women a way to figure out their roles in society, which is often seen as the mixture of modern and traditional ideas. Some women embraced Islamic practices as a way to express themselves and gain power, while others found themselves limited by the same traditions that were meant to empower them.

In the post-Soviet era, women's presence in politics in Azerbaijan dropped significantly compared to the Soviet period especially due to the removal of quotas and the focus on traditional family. Despite that, women in Azerbaijan have continued to be involved in civil society and advocacy, working to redefine their roles in the context of national identity and cultural revival.

The paper concludes that, all the years of the Soviet Union's trying to create a Soviet person, women in Azerbaijan had found themselves in the middle of conflict between Soviet-like women and Muslim women, and in the middle of economic and social challenges. In this process, the role of women dramatically changed. The Soviet's efforts to make women literate and equal with men had shaken. However, major challenges in terms of status of women seems to be coming from economic challenges, rather than Islamic revival. The new equalization area of women and men in the post-Soviet era is poverty. Islam, mainly, plays a role for reconnection to the values and traditions, indicating the desire to go back to their roots in the country, rather than turning women to the 'Muslim women'. Also, women have been taking steps towards more traditional and a new way of life for them. The path they have been walking on cannot necessarily fit the standards of Western scholars. In the transition era, what the women had to face will shape their future and maybe it will lead to find new concepts for the roles of women, not only in Azerbaijan, but also in all former Soviet republics, especially in Muslim ones.

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