

# GENDER EQUALITY IN THE HIGH POSITIONS OF THE AZERBAIJANI GOVERNMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Women empowerment is part of the Sustainable Development Goals Azerbaijan is working towards their achievement. However, challenges exist that hinder the attainment of gender equality in high-level positions in government. Such challenges are the stereotypes related to the role of women in the community and women's uncertain self-confidence and interest. This article analyses the existing level of gender inequality in high-level positions in the administrative system of Azerbaijan utilizing qualitative and quantitative data. It concludes suggesting alternative policies to tackle the gender inequality problem, e.g., introduce a quota system, raise public awareness about the significance of women in society, etc, which are evaluated across such criteria as effectiveness, legality, political acceptability, and administrative feasibility.*

**Keywords:** *Women empowerment, senior administrative positions, gender equality, quota system, Azerbaijan.*

## INTRODUCTION

*"I'm willing to be seen. I'm willing to speak up. I'm willing to keep going.  
I'm willing to listen to what others have to say.  
I'm willing to go to bed each night at peace with myself.  
I'm willing to be my biggest, best, most powerful self."*

— Emma Watson

"Gender equality and women empowerment" is considered one of the key factors for the sustainable economic development of Azerbaijan in congruence with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) it has adopted. This is because *"Only by ensuring the rights of women and girls across all the goals will we get to justice and inclusion, economies that work for all, and sustaining our shared environment now and for future generations."* (UN Women 2018).

The country is working vigorously towards their achievement, as only a small percentage of women occupy high-level government positions in the country's Administration (UNDP 2015).<sup>3</sup> It is important that more women occupy such positions, as women leaders tend to maintain equity in society and put more emphasis on education, health, and social welfare while observing economic sustainability principles, instead of focusing on defence spending, a most common preference among their male counterparts (Global Education Monitoring Report 2017).

The Conventions "On the Political Rights of Women" and "On the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" of the United Nations provide the international legal framework for Azerbaijan to promote women rights. In the eyes of the law, women and men are equal and any discrimination based on gender is inadmissible in accordance with the Constitution. The State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs and the Presidential Decree "On Implementation of the Gender National Policy in the Republic of

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP Country Profile 2015; <https://www.sdgfund.org/goal-5-gender-equality#:~:text=Empowering%20women%20and%20promoting%20gender%20equality%20is%20crucial%20to%20accelerating%20sustainable%20development.&text=Ensuring%20universal%20access%20to%20sexual,target%20to%20realizing%20this%20goal.>

Azerbaijan” are some of the policies and tools to encourage women’ participation in the political and community life.

In 2020 Azerbaijan’s score on the Global Gender Gap Index was 0.687 – measured on a scale 0 (=no parity) to 1 (=full parity) - placing the country at the 94<sup>th</sup> position among 163 countries.<sup>4</sup> On the dimension of economic participation and opportunity for women, the country’s score was 0.748 (33<sup>rd</sup> position). Conversely, on the dimension of their political empowerment the score, was 0.063 (140<sup>th</sup> position). Such low rankings are due to several factors prevalent in the political, economic, and social life of Azerbaijan. For instance, the lack of belief and interest of women on their power and development potential, or the prevalent negative and prejudiced stereotype images entrenched in society affecting women’s education prospects.

*“When the dominant social culture precludes young women from enjoying a full education and socializes them from birth into roles that are removed from the world of public decision making, then, the pool of likely women politicians is substantially reduced” (Reynolds 1999: 550).*

These factors play a significant role in women’s prospects in advancing to high-level positions in the Administration of Azerbaijan. Other factors are the choices women make on occupational areas, intra-family responsibilities and even access to the Internet; all considered crucial for their self-development and social and political participation (Azerbaijan HDR 2007).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it is high time that discussions regarding women’s role in the world are initiated by highlighting the implications of women power in the political, economic, and public life. Margaret Thatcher, a decade-long PM of British Government said that *“If you want something to be said, ask a man, if you want something to be done, ask a woman”*.<sup>5</sup> If women believed in their success at least as much as Thatcher believed in hers, there would be a few “Thatcher” occupying high positions in the Administration of Azerbaijan.

The issue of gender inequality is analysed here based on the following research question: What are the appropriate strategies to facilitate women empowerment as part of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 achievement, and to achieve gender equality in the high positions of the Azerbaijani government system? This policy problem is analysed utilising both quantitative data collected from reports of international organisations and the State Statistical Committee (SSC), as well as qualitative data from the existing literature on the subject matter.

## DISCUSSION

### Achievements

In overcoming these gender equality related challenges, the Azerbaijani government has attempted to implement many initiatives, including the design and implementation of new policies, and joining international organisations advocating the protection of women rights. In accordance with the Presidential Decree “On Implementation of the National Gender Policy in the Republic of Azerbaijan”, the local executive authorities across the Azerbaijani regions must appoint at least one woman as their Deputy Heads. Thus, 77 out of 85 Heads of local executive authorities had a woman deputy head in 2017 (SSC 2017). Furthermore, the participation rate of female representatives in Parliament has increased from 4.3% to 16.1% between 1990 and 2017 (SSC 2017). This is an indicator that some considerable progress has been made in the participation of women in occupying decision-making positions, although such expansion is not glaring.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/margaret\\_thatcher\\_127088](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/margaret_thatcher_127088)

<sup>5</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-attitudes-azerbaijan>

Additionally, the Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey indicates that 83% of the population is willing to vote for a woman representative in the next parliamentary elections.

### **Challenges**

The collapse of the Soviet Union paved the way for a transition to a new political and economic model and the creation of a free market economy. It resulted to the closure of industrial plants and other business enterprises of the soviet times across the country leading to a dramatic increase in both men and women unemployment in the 1990s (Najafizadeh 2003: 296). The economic transition that ensued changed immensely the role and status of women in society.

Firstly, the absence of jobs in both the public and private sector forced women to seek alternative job opportunities to provide for their families, e.g., as street vendors, farm pickers, or doing home-based work; jobs mostly operating in the informal market. Secondly, the lack of jobs induced male workers to migrate to other countries to find employment, so they could earn money to support their families at home to meet their living cost needs. This condition made women to assume a dual role, that of caregiver and breadwinner at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

However, while the government takes steps to improve women's access to education, services are limited at the present time. The recent development in service provision to lighten daily domestic tasks for women by providing laundry services and inexpensive meals is mainly concentrated in urban areas (ADB 2019: 56). Therefore, most women in the country are still required to dedicate their time for domestic tasks; and "time poverty" remains as an inhibitor to women's empowerment. Such stringent conditions discourage women for advancing their careers, let alone being part of the political realm and for claiming higher-level positions in the public sector.

Furthermore, those women, who were political leaders in the previous regime lost their positions after the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to changes in the laws. The rate of female deputies in Parliament decreased from 40% to 6% after the annulment of the former Soviet Union "quota system" which guaranteed that 33% of the seats in the Parliament should be occupied by women representatives (ADB 2005; 2019: xiv).

Currently the number of women in decision-making level position in all Ministries is very low. According to SSC data, Natavan Gadimova - Minister of Culture and Tourism of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic - has been the only woman minister in Azerbaijan since 2015. Another woman is the only head among local authorities, the head of the Absheron local authority.

The transition period increased pressure on women as gender-based stereotypes and patriarchal traditions were also exacerbated during this time. The Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey findings reveal that 67% of the population - 66% women and 68% men - support the notion that the main role of women is to take care of family and to do housework, e.g., cleaning, washing, cooking, and ironing. 61% of the respondents also claim that when mothers work, children suffer a lot. Moreover, 77% of the sample population said that males should be the decision-makers in the family.

These viewpoints assert that most of the men and women in the society are not in favour of women to work in because taking care of their families is their priority, thus pursuing a career

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<sup>6</sup> This situation is associated with "time poverty" of women with respect to a "triple shift", i.e., women do not have sufficient time to increase their education and work skills due to their responsibility in terms of child care, housework and other works related with gaining additional income, including elder-care works (ADB, 2005: 5).

or holding a professional job are not essential parts of their lives.<sup>7</sup> Thus, distinct division of the gender roles persists through generations effectively creating obstacles for women who aspire to follow a different path rather than being caregivers. Such gender stereotyping discourages women to become active members of the economic and political life of the country.<sup>8</sup>

### **Recommendations**

The prevailing circumstances suggest that a quota system and public awareness campaigns on the role of women are suggested policies to remedy the status quo.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the provisions of the presidential decree for a compulsory number of women deputy heads are an effective and appropriate way to apply the quota system in the country. Experience demonstrates that this alternative policy is highly likely to be effective, administratively feasible, and politically acceptable and it satisfies the criterion of legality since the Constitution supports gender equality.

Furthermore, current conditions and existing stereotypes should be altered to allow women to occupy positions of power. Thus, public awareness about women's significant and irreplaceable role ought to be raised to increase women's confidence and interest, but also, even much more crucially, to influence men's views regarding women's position in the community, since they are fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands of women, and who prevent women's development by default. Public campaigns are effective, politically acceptable, and administratively feasible since they aim to contribute to the social welfare.

Hence, any positive change would result to more opportunities for women to get a higher education, improve themselves, and become eligible for high-level positions. However, enforcing gender equality in the country by allowing more women to occupy high-level positions in government is a process that requires time and thus will be effective in the long-run.

### **CONCLUSION**

The goal of achieving gender equality is one of the main initiatives for Azerbaijan to fulfil its Sustainable Development Goals aspirations. To accomplish this goal, the country has implemented many significant initiatives such as joining international conventions and enacting legislation, relevant to the protection of women rights. However, these initiatives will take some time to accomplish their expected goal, as obstacles still do exist, which prevent their achievement. The negative influence of economic transitions has affected the social, economic, and political lives of women. The absence of jobs, the high rate of unemployment, and the huge increase of their responsibilities have sustained the gap between men and women pursuing a career. The situation has also demotivated women to compete for decision-making positions.

Notwithstanding, Azerbaijani women have been successful to some degree by raising their voices and increasing their numbers in occupying high-level positions in the Administration and Government. Alternative policies such as the quota system, and public campaigns

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<sup>7</sup> The survey has asked questions in terms of what kinds of skills and knowledge their parents taught them during being teenagers or while growing. 96% of the female respondents emphasize that they were taught mostly how to do domestic chorus while 74% of the men mention that they were taught how to repair electrical appliances (Muller, 2012, p. 7; Asian Development Bank, 2005, p. 28).

<sup>8</sup> An Australian study claims that women in senior managerial positions are more active when they work with other women peers (Rey 2005: 9). It means that if the number of women in managerial positions increases, then women will be more willing to be active in the political life.

<sup>9</sup> The quota system should be based on based on the criteria of effectiveness, legality, political acceptability, and administrative feasibility.

dedicated to promoting women's empowerment are recommended to tackle the problem.

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