

AZERI WOMEN IN TRANSITION

Women in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan

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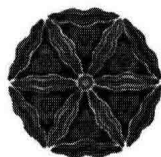
AZERI WOMEN IN TRANSITION

This is a unique ethnographic and historical account of the lives of urban women in contemporary Azerbaijan, which draws on archival, literary and academic sources, as well as an extensive selection of life-stories from women of different generations. In the context of both developing capitalism and colonial relations in the pre-Soviet era, and under the Soviet system, changes for women are explored, revealing the ways in which local cultural expectations and Islamic beliefs were accommodated in various modernisation projects.

Focusing on a group of professional women in Baku, the impact of the Soviet system on women's domestic, public and work relations, and their conceptions of femininity, are assessed. Furthermore, the significant changes for Azeri women in the post-Soviet transition to market economy, accompanied by growing Western influence, are reviewed. This book offers a rare view of the lives of Muslim women in a region of the Caucasus little explored by outsiders.

Heyat also offers revealing insights into the interaction of Russian, Soviet, Muslim and Middle Eastern ideas and cultural influences that have shaped the everyday customs and traditions of a strategic country bordering Iran, Turkey and Russia.

Farideh Heyat is an anthropologist and writer, currently based at SOAS, University of London.



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IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER,
SEDIGEY HEYAT

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GLOSSARY OF AZERI TERMS

<i>adat va anana</i>	custom and tradition
<i>aila</i>	family (<i>aila ijmasi</i> : family commune)
<i>akhlaghiyat</i>	morality (<i>akhlaghsizlik</i> : immorality, <i>akhlaghsiz</i> : immoral)
<i>aq birchek</i>	grey-haired – an older woman
<i>aq saqqal</i>	grey beard – an older man
<i>arvad</i>	woman, wife
<i>bayram</i>	festival
<i>chadra</i>	chador – a piece of cloth covering the female body head to foot
<i>charshaf</i>	a variation of chador
<i>gadin</i>	woman, female
<i>gheirat</i>	dignity, male honour
<i>gonakh</i>	guest (<i>gonakhparvarlik</i> : hospitality)
<i>haya</i>	female shame
<i>hijab</i>	the veil, veiling
<i>hormat</i>	respect, bribery
<i>ilarli</i>	progressive (<i>ilarlamak</i> : to progress)
<i>inje</i>	delicate (<i>injelik</i> : delicacy)
<i>kalaghe</i>	large headscarf worn by women
<i>khanim</i>	lady, Miss, Mrs
<i>khalgh</i>	peoples
<i>konshu</i>	neighbour (<i>konshuluk</i> : neighbourliness)
<i>madani</i>	cultured/civilised
<i>mahalla</i>	district, neighbourhood
<i>mahram</i>	close kin with whom marriage is prohibited
<i>millat</i>	nation
<i>muasir</i>	modern (<i>muasirlik</i> : modernity)
<i>namahram</i>	all those who are not <i>mahram</i>
<i>namaz</i>	Muslim daily prayers
<i>namus</i>	male honour related to female sexual propriety (<i>namuslu</i> : chaste)
<i>nazir</i>	alms
<i>vatan</i>	homeland
<i>yas</i>	wake, funerary ceremony

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INTRODUCTION

The initial ideas behind this study emerged in 1989 following the resurgence of the nationalist movement in Soviet Azerbaijan. The news of the mass anti-Soviet demonstrations in Baku in the spring of that year signalled cracks in the Soviet regime (and the possibility of travel and research there). The dispute with Armenia over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh had fuelled the anti-colonial aspirations of Soviet Azerbaijani people. The nationalist movement led by the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, *Azerbaijan Khalgh Jibhisi*,¹ called for autonomy over internal affairs and greater control over the use of Azerbaijan's rich mineral and oil resources which had, until then, been exploited by the Soviet centre and subsidised the economies of other parts of the Soviet Union. By December 1989 the movement had escalated to an uncontrollable degree as evidenced by television pictures broadcast around the world. Along the northern banks of the Aras River, separating the two Azerbaijan, joyful demonstrators unhampered by Soviet guards were clipping the barbed wire, dismantling border post and floating on rafts to the southern bank to reach Iran. For many decades, some of those people had been separated from relatives and friends who lived on the "other side" or were buried there. The demands to break down such inhumane barriers echoed the tearing down of the Berlin Wall a few weeks earlier and the emotions stirred by the coming together of a people forcibly divided.

These were indeed exciting events for many Iranian Azeris such as myself, regardless of where they had settled. For so many decades up until then Northern Azerbaijan under Soviet rule had been firmly sealed off from the neighbouring countries, its people and way of life a mystery to the outside world. My past fascination with the culture of Soviet Azerbaijan had stemmed from the assumption that here was an alternative society to the one in which I had grown up, and that, under socialism with official principles of equality, entirely different rules and attitudes governed women's lives. Over the years, prior to studying anthropology, I had learned about the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet vision of culture as an entity that could be shaped and manipulated through social engineering.² Studying the impact of Sovietisation on the culture of Northern Azerbaijan could provide revealing insights into the methods of socialist planners in the USSR and elsewhere in the communist world, as well as the impact of their

policies on shaping gender relations. But there were severe restrictions on travel to the region, and any form of ethnographic or social science research was virtually impossible until towards the end of the Soviet era.

When I finally made my first trip to Baku in 1992, the Soviet regime had disintegrated and the National Front was preparing to take over the government. The memories of Russian tanks rolling into Baku in January 1990 were still very fresh in everyone's mind and one of the first places I was taken to visit was the *shahidlar Khiyabani* (Avenue of Martyrs), a cemetery for the hundreds of people killed in that event. There was a strong anti-Russian sentiment in the country and a collective endeavour to reject and disavow all that was considered "soviet". The role models for "progress" and "development" were now shifting away from the Russians, the former colonial power, to the West (Americans and Europeans), while ethnic and national affinities were rekindled with the South, Iranians and Turks. By September 1994, when I began my fieldwork, a clique of the former communist elite, fully versed in the language and symbols of nationalism, had overthrown the National Front government and were in power. The recovery of the pre-Soviet past and all that had been publicly suppressed in the Soviet era continued to form a major part of official discourse and provided the symbols and markers of legitimacy of the newly independent state. This was also manifested at the personal level in the way elements of identity relating to the pre-Soviet era such as interest in practising religion or family links with Iran were often pointed out to me by people with whom I became acquainted. My own positionality as an Iranian Azeri also elicited claims of unity of the Azeri nation, and I was frequently told: "*Biz bir millatik*" (We are one nation).

But for me, this desire for unity highlighted not only the presumed similarities due to shared ethnic origin, but also the diversity of cultures between Iranian and the formerly Soviet Azerbaijan. Contemporary Azeri culture was a multi-layered hybrid of Soviet, Muslim, Azeri, Iranian and Turkic influences, shaped through exposure to a multitude of political and economic systems since the turn of the century: first, the oil-related early capitalist development under tsarist colonial rule, then a brief spell as an independent republic (1918–1920) followed by seventy years of communist rule. Now once more the country had opened up to the cultural and political influences from its neighbours and beyond, its governance at the mercy of the convoluted politics of global oil interests. In the midst of the confusion of values and allegiances generated by the breakup of Soviet power and Russian dominance, the assertion of an independent national identity was accompanied by constant references to the first independent republic, its leaders and literary figures, and the custom and traditions assumed to relate to Azerbaijan's Muslim, Iranian and Turkic past. Thus, in the early months of my fieldwork, I began to share the fascination of my host community with its own past. Nevertheless, what, in fact, accounted for much of the present-day culture of Azerbaijan, and the position of women in particular, was the impact of many decades of the Soviet system and the social policies enacted at different phases of it. By 1995 it was also clear that with rapid economic and social changes, aspects of

personal life and everyday customs that could be attributed to the Soviet system were beginning to disappear. Conducting an anthropological study of the lives of women that was in part a historical study was therefore a timely project, and more difficult in years to come with the passing away of older informants.

This study is based on field research I carried out between September 1994 and 1995, and intermittently for a further five months between 1996 and 2000. It aims to provide some insight into the impact of the Soviet system on the position of urban women in Azerbaijan and the major changes affecting them in the post-Soviet era. Focusing on middle- and upper-class professional women in Baku, their domestic, public and work roles and relations, and their conceptions of femininity, I have examined the interactions between Soviet institutions and Muslim Azeri culture that have shaped and influenced their life options. As members of the Azeri intelligentsia, these women were both the most Russified stratum of society, conscious of their "Soviet" identity, and at the same time bearers of Azerbaijani national and ethnic identities and as such party to the current, post-Soviet attempts to redefine and recuperate the latter. As socially active citizens, and career women with heavy domestic duties, these women were further subjected to conflicting demands and expectations. They therefore offered a productive vantage point from which to analyse gender dynamics in Soviet and post-Soviet Azeri society.

In order to clarify my use of the term "class", I must add that although officially the Soviet Union was claimed to consist of two classes (peasants and working class), and a third group, the "intelligentsia", in reality there was a complex system of social stratification based on access to power and privilege (Inkeles, 1960; Hegedus, 1977). Furthermore, by the end of the Soviet era, according to some observers (Rywwin, 1989) a middle class had emerged whose values and expectations resembled those in the West, albeit with some regional cultural differences. The group of respondents whom I interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds, some from the pre-revolutionary elite families, others from lower-class urban families. However, by virtue of education and professional status they had all attained the rank of the intelligentsia (situating them between what would be the equivalent of the middle and upper class in the West).

Furthermore in Azerbaijan, as in other Soviet republics, the state constantly sought to diminish class distinctions in access to the arts, education, consumer goods and more general lifestyles. This led to some degree of social and cultural levelling especially in the urban centres. The promotion of a Soviet way of life (the evolution of the Soviet Man) through cultural engineering, and undermining of religious and ethnic differences, was especially the case in Baku. This was a highly cosmopolitan centre with an international industrial workforce, where in the later Soviet era there was considerable social intermingling among members of various ethnic groups. With regard to cultural distinctions, therefore, the more significant differentiation in women's lives, and their familial, social and gender relations, was in the urban/rural divide. The rural population throughout the Soviet period had in fact retained far more of the ethnic and "traditional" social norms and customs,

as reflected in the larger family size, inter-generational living arrangements, and life-cycle ceremonies such as weddings and circumcisions.

The process of Sovietisation in Azerbaijan, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, involved large-scale integration of women in the economic and political life of that society. This reflected an explicit recognition by the Soviet regime of the pivotal role of women in the process of modernisation. However, formal equality under the law, in education and in most spheres of employment was accompanied by new forms of domination and subjection (to state and economy) which surpassed that of other modernising states. Women's emancipation under the particular form of Soviet modernisation and in the context of its political and economic structure evolved in paradoxical ways distinct from the West and the post-colonial societies emerging from colonial encounters with Western powers. This was especially the case with the highly educated professional women who were made the showcases of Soviet emancipation and liberalisation but who continued to be regarded by their ethnic community as the custodians of ethnic identity and preservers of ethnic custom. While being highly educated and career oriented these women were also expected to observe strict sexual standards and carry out onerous domestic duties. Studying a group of professional women who are the best exemplars of these contradictions therefore provided a good point of entry for an analysis of how local cultural expectations and Islamic beliefs were accommodated to the project of Soviet modernisation.

Over the past two decades many studies of Middle Eastern and other Muslim societies have offered much insight into different aspects of post-colonial nationalisms and the modernising projects and their effects on women's lives (Jayawardena, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1991a, 1991b; Moghadam, 1993; Abu-Lughod, 1998). However, little is known about how Soviet-type modernisation affected women's lives in Muslim societies. Beyond the quantitative indicators of high levels of education and workforce participation rates, we have little insight into the more intimate negotiations of their self and femininity, and the norms governing their gender and familial relations and responsibilities.

The Soviet literature on women in Azerbaijan was based on two major premises. First, a broad assumption that sexual equality and socialism were synonymous; hence the degree of integration of women into economic and political life was an indicator of both the "progress" of society and the "emancipation" of its women. This led to the promotion of women's education, paid employment and participation in political institutions, and analyses of their status in society were based solely on these quantifiable indicators. Second, the supposition that Muslim women's pre-revolutionary status was that of an exploited class, constrained and degraded by veiling, segregation, and highly discriminatory matrimonial laws and customs. The writings on the history of Muslim women by indigenous Soviet authors clearly reflect these fundamental assumptions (for Uzbekistan, Aminova, 1985; for Azerbaijan, Kadirbekova, 1936; Sultanova, 1964; Suleymanova, 1970).

Furthermore, Soviet authors took the position that the drive to modernise Muslim societies and emancipate their women was by and large the work of the Bolsheviks, and was implemented following the establishment of Soviet power in these regions. This viewpoint has informed many Western scholars who relied on secondary data provided by Soviet authorities. Massell's (1974) extensive study of Central Asian women in the early Soviet period is a prime example of this. Moreover, his argument that Soviet planners viewed women in Muslim societies as a structural weak link in the traditional order, susceptible to militant appeal and qualifying as a "surrogate proletariat", is questionable in the case of Azerbaijan where a real proletariat did exist in the region's oil and other industries.

In her major study of Soviet women Lapidus (1978) also puts forward the hypothesis that the Soviet regime's intentions in integrating women into economic and political life, and more broadly their emancipation, was based far more on its concern with seizure and consolidation of power than any libertarian Marxist or feminist preoccupations (*ibid.*: 9). But the problem with such a perspective is its neglect of the revolutionary women's own agency in the act of transformation of women's lives (whether Muslim or not) in the early Soviet period, and the local antecedents of the women's emancipation and modernisation movements in the Muslim peripheries of the Russian Empire. As explained in Chapters 3 and 4, the pre-revolutionary early modernisers in Azerbaijan had campaigned for and established a trend for women's education, unveiling and desegregation well before the Soviet take-over of the country in 1920. Indeed, it was this early women's emancipation movement that provided most of the cadres for Soviet campaigns among women in the towns and villages of Azerbaijan.

More generally, most Western studies of Soviet women have focused on education and employment as parameters defining women's emancipation, and provided data and analyses largely based on Russian – and to a lesser extent other European – Soviet women (Dodge, 1966; Dunn, and Dunn, 1977; Lapidus, 1978, 1982; Heitlinger, 1979). This may be understandable in the light of difficulty of access by foreign researchers to the more politically sensitive Muslim republics. But the consequent interchangeability of "Russian" and "Soviet", so often implicit in these works, has obscured the substantial differences in the cultural norms and local customs affecting women's position in the family, at work and in public life in various regions of the Soviet Union. For instance, community norms concerning sexual morality and the Muslim notion of *namus* (honour related to women's sexuality) has no exact equivalent in the Russian language. Community norms concerning sexual morality vary widely not only between the European and Muslim regions but also according to the degree of Russification (close contact and integration with Russian and other European Soviet populations) within and across different Muslim ethnic groups. Hence, in Azerbaijan, as well as in Uzbekistan (Lubin, 1984), cultural factors related to community expectations of women's "modesty" have affected their patterns of employment (discussed in Chapter 6).

In this study I take issue with the notion of "Sovietisation" as a unitary phenomenon. The indigenous culture and the social and political structure of

INTRODUCTION

pre-Soviet Azeri society account for important differences from Central Asia and other Soviet societies in their later encounters with the Soviet system. These differences are particularly pertinent in terms of understanding the position of women in these societies today. In the case of Azerbaijan, its closer proximity to Europe, the development of the oil industry in Baku, the rise of an indigenous bourgeoisie and the commitment of its early modernisers to the question of women's rights (*gadin hukuki*) clearly gave Azeri women a head start over the Central Asian women on the path to modernity.

Unlike much of the literature on gender in the Muslim world that does not probe into the impact of ethnicity (except for South Asia), this study discusses the role of ethnic relations and competition in determining the pre-Soviet elite styles, and highlights the role of ethnicity, as formed by Soviet policies, in shaping the mores and community expectations of Azeri women. Most crucially, it reveals the multiple – at times contradictory – ideologies that governed the lives of Azeri women under the Soviet system (particularly in its later stage) and the way this shaped their educational and career patterns, their power relations in the domestic and in the public arena, and their concepts of self and femininity. However, I am not in favour of a dichotomous model of “Azeri in Private, Soviet in Public” (Tohidi, 1996) that demarcates behaviour and attitudes in the private sphere, attributing it to ethnic Azeri culture, while what is displayed in public is considered to be Soviet. A similar line of argument was put forward by Tett (1994) for Tajikistan. Instead, I propose a more fluid system of thought and action in which values and cultural norms arising from an ethnic Azeri origin also permeated the social domain guided by the officialdom, and vice versa. Examples of this include the way social relations in public life reflected the strong system of kinship (*gohumluk*), prominence of elders (*aq saqqal* and *aq birchek*), and overwhelming hospitality (*gonakhpavarlik*) that are major markers of Azeri culture.

It has been agreed by many observers of Soviet societies that contrary to the state's claims to establishing gender equality women have remained in a subordinate position in many areas of life and carried a “double burden” combining home and the workplace (Field, 1968; Lapidus, 1978, 1982; Heitlinger, 1979; Allott, 1985; Einhorn, 1993). However, during the Soviet era, the subtle ways in which women's power and influence in Azeri society grew substantially were not so much in the conventionally observed arenas of political power or personal autonomy and mobility, which was in any case restricted for most Soviet citizens regardless of their gender. It was more within the institution of the family as mothers and wives, and within the broader kin-based networks that were crucial to the unofficial relations sustaining the alternative economy and polity that women found were the bases of their social power. Among the well-educated urban population women's influence may override men's in matters of household decisions where mothers have the main influence on children's education and marriage options. However, the state's official doctrine of gender equality enacted in legislation and various social policies, coupled with women's economic independence through employment while being largely in charge of

domestic responsibilities, were major factors contributing to women's increased power in the home.

I would propose, therefore, that in analysing Azeri gender dynamics under the Soviet system Western feminist concepts such as personal autonomy, or individual power and authority in public life, are of limited utility in defining women's subordination and empowerment. For Azeri society, as this study illustrates, the workings of the social, economic and political system in the Soviet era led to a privileging of "private" over "public" in the acquisition of power and meaning. Women's closer association with domestic life and greater authority within the family were therefore important empowering factors within the private domain that were also reflected in social life, given the particular positioning of the private in the late Soviet period. However, the contradictory expectations of femininity and ideals of womanhood that emanated from state-sponsored official discourse on the one hand, and community-based discourse on religious and ethnic prescriptions, and local forms on the other, led to paradoxes and ambiguities in women's public, domestic and work responsibilities, and their presentation of self. What is particularly significant here is that for Soviet Azeri women ethnicity became an overriding marker of their identity politics. Indeed, on a societal level Azeriness itself was closely associated with attributes of femininity, rendering women primary bearers of ethnic identity (as discussed in Chapter 7). The link between gender, ethnicity and nationalism, and women's role as guardians of traditional order and bearers of ethnic/national identity have been discussed for many societies around the world (Charles and Hintjens, 1998; Wilford and Miller, 1998). In the case of Azeri women the overriding importance of ethnicity was partly due to Soviet nationalities policy³ which highlighted the significance of ethnic affiliation, despite being coupled with the repression of political expressions of nationalism.

Stalin had formulated the essence of the "nationality question" as the need to eliminate the backwardness of various nationalities and their progress towards catching up with Russia (Slezkine, 1994: 423). The nationalities policy was to facilitate this in its promotion of ethnic and national cultures in a highly democratic framework, including, in theory, the right to cessation. In reality this was a response to demands for substantial concessions in national rights to those nationalities such as Azerbaijanis who had already set up their own independent republics following the October Revolution and were strongly opposed to domination from Moscow. The subsequent development of nationalities policy and its inadvertent consequences of consolidating ethnic divisions and creating or strengthening national identities – particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus – has been widely discussed in recent literature (Smith, 1990; Suny, 1990; Bremmer, 1993; Zaslavski, 1993; Slezkine, 1994; Brubaker, 1996). The crucial factors here were the ethno-territorial federalism of the state, the system of internal passports recording nationality by ethnic descent, nativisation of local cadres and intelligentsia (*korenizatsiia*), the cultivation of a large number of national languages and the development of schooling in these languages. In the Transcaucasus a