

# **WOMEN OF ASIA**

**Globalization, Development,  
and Gender Equity**

**EDITED BY**

**Mehrangiz Najafizadeh  
and Linda L. Lindsey**



# Women of Asia

With thirty-two original chapters reflecting cutting edge content throughout developed and developing Asia, *Women of Asia: Globalization, Development, and Gender Equity* is a comprehensive anthology that contributes significantly to understanding globalization's transformative process and the resulting detrimental and beneficial consequences for women in the four major geographic regions of East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Eurasia/Central Asia. The anthology gives "voice" to women and provides innovative ways through which salient understudied issues pertaining to Asian women's situation are brought to the forefront.

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## THE AZERI WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DURING TRANSITION

### The Role of the State

During the Soviet era, Azeri women and men were formally decreed as equal. Although this ideal of equality did not always translate to reality, Azeri women did attain major benefits compared to the Czarist era. Equal pay for equal work, a quota system providing representation in the political system, and a government agency tasked with protecting women's welfare and women's rights are a few examples. Independence from the Soviet Union, in turn, provided Azeri women with new forms of freedom, including political and religious freedom, but it also affected women adversely through the dissolution of particular social programs and laws that had benefited women during the Soviet era (Najafzadeh 2015).

Concurrent with the dramatic political and economic change during the initial years of transition, the decade of the 1990s marked the beginning of the enactment of Azerbaijan government legislation, decrees, and acts pertaining to Azeri women, and it also marked the emergence of the post-Soviet Azeri women's movement (see, e.g., Cornell 2011; Kamrava 2001; SPPRED 2003; State Committee 2009, 2014; UNDP 1999). Of major significance was President Heydar Aliyev's 1994 Decree that led to the formation of the Azerbaijan National Preparatory Committee, which included women both from government agencies and from Azeri women's advocacy organizations (NGOs) and which was tasked with preparing for participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995. Two points are particularly

noteworthy. *First*, President Aliyev's support for the establishment of the Preparatory Committee signaled a significant commitment by the newly independent Azerbaijani government to accord formal recognition and legitimacy to Azeri women's issues. *Second*, because formal education for both women and men had been a cornerstone of Soviet Azerbaijan social policy, a quite sizable number of highly educated Azeri women constituted a major force in the Azeri women's movement and in advocating on behalf of all Azeri women in newly independent Azerbaijan (Najafzadeh 2003, 2015; Najafzadeh and Mennerick 2003).

Of central importance to the institutionalization of women's issues, Azerbaijan joined the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in June 1995, and Azeri women, including both government and NGO representatives participated in the World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. Certainly, the Beijing 1995 conference and subsequent cooperative efforts established the foundation for future NGO activities and for government decrees and legislation pertaining to women's issues, including: President Aliyev's 1998 Decree—"On Measures to Promote Women's Roles in Azerbaijan"—and the establishment of the Azerbaijan State Committee on Women's Issues to foster women's rights and also to develop relations with Azeri women's NGOs; the president's 2000 Decree, "On the Implementation of State Policy on Women's Issues in Azerbaijan"; and the president's signing in September 2000 of the "Millennium Declaration" which committed Azerbaijan to the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including the goal of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. Such presidential actions were of utmost importance as they provided formal governmental recognition of women's issues, to be followed in subsequent years by additional decrees and laws to protect and benefit women (IMF 2003; Najafzadeh 2015; OHCHR n.d.; UNWomen n.d.).

## The Role of Azeri Women's NGOs

Together with government actions, Azerbaijan also witnessed a surge of Azeri women's NGOs (advocacy associations) that sought to address pressing needs of women during this period of social, political, and economic transition. Various factors were instrumental in fostering the emergence and growth of these women's advocacy groups, including: (1) an established base of highly educated women committed to gender equality; (2) increased awareness and sensitivity to issues of public well-being, in the context of the demise of the "Soviet safety-net," the economic-based suffering due to the transition, and the desperate need for humanitarian assistance to IDPs/refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh War; (3) increased involvement of Azeri women in international conferences and forums that focused attention on women's issues, including the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995; (4) increased interaction with international organizations—such as the United Nations Development Programme Gender in Development Project (UNDP-GID), the United Nations NGO Resource Center, the Open Society Institute (OSI-Azerbaijan), and the Initiative for Social Action and Renewal in Eurasia (ISAR)—which provided assistance both in the establishment and in the nurturing of Azeri women's NGOs (Lemberanskaya and Mamedova 2001; Najafizadeh 2001, 2003, 2006; Tohidi 2004; UNDP 1999: 8–12, 61–65).

As an example of one such Azeri NGO, the Azerbaijan Women and Development Center (*Azərbaycan Qadın və Inkışaf Mərkəzi*) was established in 1994 by Elmira Suleymanova: Doctor of Chemistry, academic scholar, and a leading advocate of women's rights. As the first gender-related research center in Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijan Women and Development Center was active in preparations for the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995 as well as in addressing women's issues following the conference. More specifically, the Center has worked independently, as well as with national and international

agencies, to advocate for Azeri women's well-being by bringing women's issues to the forefront; examples include women's health, gender-based violence, women's social and political rights, and the rights of women IDPs/refugees. In addition, in 2002, Dr. Suleymanova was elected by the parliament to serve as the first Republic of Azerbaijan National Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman), and she continues to serve in that capacity. Furthermore, the Azerbaijan Women and Development Center also continues to function on behalf of Azeri women (Najafizadeh 2003, 2006, 2017).

Taken together, the varied Azerbaijan government actions and the concerted efforts of Azeri women's NGOs have been instrumental in providing Azeri women a "voice" and in the *social reconstruction* of women's roles in the "new" post-Soviet Azeri society.

## ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND THE WELL-BEING OF WOMEN

The 1994 "Contract of the Century" and various other economic development activities related to oil and natural gas production and export, discussed previously, ultimately provided substantial economic growth in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Following President Heydar Aliyev's death in 2003, his son, Ilham Aliyev, was elected President of Azerbaijan, and he continued with development projects to improve the economy and to enhance public well-being. This economic recovery period also brought a construction boom including new housing as well as public infrastructure projects pertaining to water, electricity, and gas distribution, highways, ports, public parks, airports, and other such projects. Further, this period witnessed reductions in poverty and significant improvements in the standard of living, compared to the 1990s (Najafizadeh 2015, 2017). Such improvements in overall public well-being are reflected in the United Nations

Development Program *Human Development Report* (UNDP 2007, 2016) where Azerbaijan had a Human Development Index rank of 77 in 2014, compared to 101 in 2005. Likewise, poverty had declined since the 1990s, and life expectancy had increased quite significantly, from 65 years in the early 1990s to 71 years as of 2015. The economic recovery also had a specific impact on Azeri women's situation as Azeri women occupied 17 percent of the seats in the Azerbaijan Parliament, 94 percent of adult women completed at least some secondary level of schooling, 62 percent of women participated in the labor force, and Azerbaijan ranked 68 out of 188 nations on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index (UNDP 2016).

## ISLAM AND WOMEN IN POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN

The Republic of Azerbaijan Constitution declares post-Soviet Azerbaijan to be a secular state with freedom for all religions. Although disrupted by 70 years of Soviet efforts to suppress Islam and to promote state-atheism, Islamic practices persisted informally and privately within many Azeri families during the Soviet era. Following independence, Islam initially gained public visibility in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, and it has become much more public and prominent during recent decades, in part due to the government's acknowledgement and celebration of Azerbaijan's Islamic heritage. Examples include the government's recognition of Islamic holidays such as *Eid al-Adha* and *Eid al-fitr*, the restoration of religious shrines and mosques, and the construction of new mosques. Furthermore, the Holy Koran has been translated into Azerbaijani and is now readily available as are Islam-related books as well as internet-based religious information (Najafizadeh 2015). And various national and international conferences and events have been convened in Azerbaijan, including the conferences "Women in the Islamic World: Traditional

Values and Modernity" in 2009 and "Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of the OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation] Member States" in 2014, as well as the "2017 Islamic Solidarity Games" with athletes from 54 Islamic nations including Central Asian countries.

Yet, while Islam is an integral part of Azeri cultural heritage and identity and an estimated 93 percent to 99 percent of Azeris view themselves as "Muslim," secular values are also very prominent in Azeri culture, and the most recent data from Win-Gallup International polls indicate that only 34 percent of Azeris consider themselves to be a "religious person." Thus, most Azeris view themselves as Muslim, yet a smaller percentage of Azeris are actually practicing Muslims. Furthermore, most Azeri women do not actively practice Islam, but of those women who do practice, most do so privately in their own homes. Relatedly, only a small percentage of Azeri women actually wear Islamic hijab (head-covering), the reasons ranging from individual choice to familial influence or pressure. Yet, for women, freedom of religion in post-Soviet Azerbaijan is quite significant in that they are now free to practice religion or not to practice and to do so either privately or publicly. For some Azeri women, Islam has become a factor in the *social reconstruction* of their identity and roles in Azeri society (Balci 2004; Cornell 2011; Goyushov 2008; Heyat 2002, 2006, 2008; Najafizadeh 2012, 2015, 2017; Smith 2017; Tohidi 1996, 1997, 1998; Valiyev 2005).

## PERSISTING CHALLENGES FOR AZERI WOMEN

Azeri women have achieved major gains in many respects since independence, as reflected in Republic of Azerbaijan codes and laws, such as *The Republic of Azerbaijan Family Code* (1999), giving wife and husband equal property rights; the law *On Guarantees of Equal Rights*