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Analysis of Gender Equality among Officials of State Political Institutions in Azerbaijan

Abstract

This study examines the current state of gender equality in leadership positions in political and public institutions in Azerbaijan, particularly the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in senior management and decision-making positions. Despite the existence of legal and institutional mechanisms aimed at ensuring gender equality, women's participation in leadership positions in political institutions is still limited. The study was conducted based on a qualitative descriptive methodology, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten employees (six men and four women) working in various government institutions in Azerbaijan, as well as through document analysis. The results show that traditional gender roles, family responsibilities, patriarchal cultural values, weak institutional support, and persistent gender stereotypes create serious obstacles for women to advance to leadership positions. The study also highlights the role of social attitudes and male perspectives in perpetuating gender inequality and reveals that education, awareness-raising, family support, and institutional reforms are crucial in ensuring gender balance.

Keywords: *gender equality, women in leadership, political institutions, gender stereotypes*

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Azərbaycanda dövlət siyasi qurumlarının vəzifəli şəxsləri arasında gender bərabərliyinin təhlili

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycanı siyasi və ictimai institutlarda rəhbər vəzifələrdə gender bərabərliyinin mövcud vəziyyətini, xüsusilə də qadınların yüksək idarəetmə və qərar qəbul etmə mövqelərində az təmsil olunmasının səbəblərini araşdırır. Gender bərabərliyinin təmin olunmasına yönəlmiş hüquqi və institusional mexanizmlərin mövcudluğuna baxmayaraq, qadınların siyasi institutlarda rəhbər vəzifələrdə iştirakı hələ də məhduddur. Tədqiqat keyfiyyət yönümlü təsviri metodologiya əsasında aparılmış və Azərbaycanda müxtəlif dövlət qurumlarında çalışan on nəfər əməkdaş (altı kişi və dörd qadın) ilə yarı-strukturlaşdırılmış müsahibələr, eləcə də sənəd təhlili vasitəsilə məlumatlar toplanmışdır.

Nəticələr göstərir ki, ənənəvi gender rolları, ailə məsuliyyətləri, patriarxal mədəni dəyərlər, institusional dəstəyin zəifliyi və davam edən gender stereotipləri qadınların rəhbər vəzifələrə irəliləməsinə ciddi maneələr yaradır. Tədqiqat eyni zamanda ictimai münasibətlərin və kişilərin baxışlarının gender bərabərsizliyinin davamlılığında rolunu vurğulayır və təhsil, maarifləndirmə, ailə dəstəyi və institusional islahatların gender balansının təmin edilməsində mühüm əhəmiyyət daşıdığını ortaya qoyur.

Açar sözlər: gender bərabərliyi, qadın liderliyi, siyasi institutlar, gender stereotipləri

Introduction

This study examines the condition of gender equality within the leadership positions of political institutions in Azerbaijan. Throughout history, the power imbalance in the gender dynamic between women and men has resulted in the subjugation of women, characterized by discrimination and impeding their complete personal growth (Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy, 2018). In Azerbaijan, similar to many nations worldwide, the realms of political activity and public decision-making continue to be mostly controlled by male individuals (Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy, 2018). The establishment of political objectives is mostly influenced by males, resulting in the perpetuation of a political culture that centers on male behavior and life experiences (ADB, 2005). Upon examination through the lens of the Milli Majlis, the governing institution responsible for legislative authority in the Republic of Azerbaijan, it becomes evident that although in 1989 women constituted 40% of the deputies in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Azerbaijan, yet during the first year after achieving independence, the proportion of women in positions of representation saw a significant decline, reaching a mere 6% (ADB, 2005). According to statistical data, significant gender imbalance exists in all ministries in Azerbaijan: 562 out of 636 senior management positions, or 88.4%, are held by men (ADB, 2005). At present, the representation of women in the Milli Majlis stands at a mere 26 out of 125 deputies (MM, 2025). The number of women in the gender distribution of civil servants working in the Office of the Milli Majlis is quite small (see Table 1) (SCFWCP, 2021).

Table 1.
 The number of civil servants working in the Office of Milli Majlis.

	Male	Female
Committee chairmen	86.7 %	13.3 %
Heads of departments in the Office	78.6 %	21.4 %
Deputy heads of departments in the Office	77 %	23 %
Sector managers in the Office	74.3 %	25.7 %

The attainment of gender equality and the empowerment of women are essential for the advancement and societal growth as a whole; besides, from a developmental standpoint, the equitable inclusion of women in decision-making institutions is crucial for the formulation of gender-responsive policies and the promotion of democratic governance (Dlanjwa, 2018). Gender-based discrimination is strictly prohibited under the legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan; in fact, the commission of such conduct is punishable by criminal liability (Article 154 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan). The state strategy to enhance the participation of women in political decision-making was established with the issuance of the Decree “On Implementation of State Women’s Policy” by National Leader Heydar Aliyev on March 6, 2000. Regardless of the nature of the state institution’s operations, this Decree mandates that women and men be represented equally in management positions. Despite all this, it is still important to investigate the reason for the small

number of women in leadership positions, why women in Azerbaijan still face a number of obstacles and problems that prevent them from advancing in high management positions, and to find the necessary ways to eliminate the gap that exists here.

Research

The primary goal of this research is to examine the underlying causes behind the limited representation of women in leadership roles within the Azerbaijani environment. It aims to identify the elements that contribute to this phenomenon and explore if there are certain requirements that women must meet in order to assume leadership positions.

This study investigates the subsequent questions:

1. What are the primary barriers that impact the acceptance of gender equality and the promotion of women, particularly in senior management roles?
2. What are the attitudes and perception held by males about the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in Azerbaijan?

Maseko (2013) asserts that a notable disparity persists in the representation of women across several domains of leadership and decision-making processes, spanning both developing and developed nations. An argument that has been put forth throughout history to account for the limited representation of women in leadership positions is that the goals or intentions of the male and female lifestyles are dissimilar (Rincón et al., 2017). The obstacles that impact the acceptance of gender equality are categorized as a “type of mental discriminant function” by Carnahan and Greenwood (2018) when assessing candidates. Furthermore, as mentioned by Ridgeway and Correll (2004), this assessment can be impacted by personal attitudes and beliefs regarding gender roles, as well as by prejudices and inequities. Another literature describes that the underrepresentation of women in state leadership roles in Azerbaijan has been attributed to a perceived deficit in their expertise and understanding of political processes (ADB, 2005). According to Kulkarni and Mishra (2022), the primary obstacle that women encounter in leadership positions is a lack in their ability for risk-taking. Additionally, empirical studies have provided evidence indicating that individuals tend to exhibit a lower level of respect for women occupying leadership roles compared to their male counterparts (Vial et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is underscored that women show less assertiveness in leadership roles due to their heightened focus on empathetic and interpersonal relationships (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). As there is a gap in researching this topic in Azerbaijan, it is not possible to conduct more analyses.

Gender equality refers to the principle that individuals of both genders possess the same rights and are afforded equal opportunities, responsibilities, and participation in both public and private spheres of life (Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy, 2018). This study will base on Gendered Organization Theory, since this theory is utilized as a framework to discover, evaluate, and mitigate covert gender-based discrimination and unfairness within organizational settings (Clark-Saboda & Lemke, 2023).

This paper employs a descriptive research methodology, as it involves collecting data to address questions regarding the current state of the subject under investigation (Leavy, 2017).

The research paper placed more emphasis on a qualitative method, since it explored “the ways people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and attribute meanings to these experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary emphasis of this study is on the participants’ perspectives about gender equality in leadership positions, aligning the research with an interpretive/constructivist framework. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted the verbs “describe,” “understand,” and “interpret” to elucidate the underlying objective of the constructivist paradigm.

The data were gathered by means of different data collection methods, such as interviews and document analysis. This study employed nonprobability sampling, which is widely favored in qualitative research (Schutt, 2017). Specifically, purposeful sampling, the most prevalent form of nonprobability sampling, utilized. This method is driven by the investigators’ intention to uncover, comprehend, and gain profound insights (Schutt, 2017). It enables the investigators to deliberately select participants from whom the most valuable knowledge can be obtained (Babbie, 2014). As a

qualitative research instrument, face-to-face semi-structured interview utilized to gather data from the selected individuals, since this format allowed the researcher to utilize open-ended questions to gain more information about the research (Adams, 2015). The participants for this study were 4 women and 6 men working in leadership positions in public organizations located in Azerbaijan. Overall sample size included 10 people. In this study, the researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the findings by using technique such as an external auditor. As an external auditor, the research work assessed by someone unfamiliar with the study to guarantee an objective assessment of the research (Creswell, 2012).

The processes of interview transcription and coding comprised the analysis of the acquired data. For the purpose of time efficiency, an analysis conducted promptly following each data collection. Any data that is classified similarly or appears to be related grouped together. The researcher employed Excel program for coding purposes.

Babbie (2014) asserts that ethical considerations must be taken into account by researchers throughout the processes of data gathering and reporting. Ethical issues encompass communicating the purpose of the study to participants, refraining from deceptive practices, demonstrating respect for the research site, fostering reciprocity, maintaining participant anonymity, and engaging in collaborative efforts with them (Creswell, 2012; Babbie, 2014). In order to protect the participants throughout data collection, the researcher used informed consent form to ensure their confidentiality and beforehand of interview got the permission of participants to be recorded.

Results and Discussion

The results of the qualitative data are presented in this chapter of the study. The results presented below were obtained from an interview with 10 persons who work in senior positions in different areas in Azerbaijan. The obtained data was analyzed by dividing into 2 parts as women and men perceptions on the topic.

By using a purposeful sampling strategy, the researcher chose 10 people who knew English language and work in senior positions for the interview. Out of 10 people, 60% are males and 40% are females. Interviews were conducted using an interview consent form and protocol that included a total of 12 semi-structured questions in English, consisting of 2 sections (7 questions for women and 5 additional questions for men).

Each interview took an average of 30–45 minutes, and but due to a huge load of work, $n = 2$ participants received online questionnaires and they filled out the answers online.

Factors which hinder women's participation in senior positions

The interviewed women mostly ascribed the factors hindering women from pursuing managerial roles to family responsibilities. The respondents think that women in Azerbaijan often do not aspire to be in a high position because they are considered to be responsible for family household affairs; often, women just want to have a job with a small monthly income. Furthermore, the significance of traditions is noteworthy in this context, and society's dearth of trust in women has also been identified as a crucial factor. Female respondent put it as "fact that prevailing part of leaders in different organizations are males who can have doubts in women skills and capabilities." The primary challenge for women, according to the male respondent, is ineffectively managing their time and energy between their job commitments and personal lives, while also navigating the societal expectations placed upon them. Male respondent thinks that women don't face any serious obstacles being promoted to senior positions, but for him, "it is not right for women to give work order, instructions, task to men, women should to stay at home and take care of the children."

Female respondent mentioned "traditional family norms where women can have only wife and mother role in society, so they will be left without sufficient education." Another factors such as early marriage, pregnancy, etc., mentioned mostly by female interviewees (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Factors hindering women's promotion

Female interviewee depicted that gender inequalities in leadership roles stem from specific cultural, institutional, and social factors. She strongly believes that in certain institutions male leaders can be a serious obstacle for female candidates who might be considered as the ones unable of fulfilling their business functions and responsibilities due to a number of social and health conditions: "Sometimes, women candidates can be considered incompetent of making strategic decisions or fulfilling wide scale strategic institutional activities, while considered 'weak' or 'unable' due to stereotyped perspectives to gender roles." Male respondent asserted that "neither fathers nor husbands want their daughter or wife to be in higher positions because it is considered as a very hard job for them. Cultural norms accept women as a teacher or doctor." Geographical region and culture have great influence to career of women (Female participant, 2025). Female participant emphasized that the absence of familial support, coupled with cultural beliefs that males excel in strategic leadership and decision-making, adversely impacts women's careers.

Advancing gender equality

Respondents believe that raising awareness and providing education are extremely important factors to advance gender equality in senior positions. Moreover, with the changing philosophy and widening horizons of the younger generations, females tend to demonstrate more willingness to hold senior positions, which can significantly contribute to promote gender balance in high level hierarchy. Female respondent compared Azerbaijan in 1920–1930s by saying that the main goal of the period was increasing the number of educated citizens, especially women, which after 30–40 year the was huge difference between two categories. By having adequate education women are empowered to break the stereotypes and prove they can be successful in senior positions (Female participant, 2025). Male participant thinks that raising "awareness and providing education are important factors in advancing gender equality in any positions."

Influence of public attitudes

When it comes to influence of public attitudes on the willingness of women to get into leadership positions, the female interviewee noted that the positive public image of female leaders and visible role models can lead to inspiration and motivation, hence increasing the younger generation's interest and willingness for promotion into leadership positions. Female interviewee underlined the same opinion by saying, "there should be strong women model for younger generation, who will inspire them with leadership qualities." Female interviewee believes that public attitude can influence women negatively, as they can have impostor syndrome and lose self-confidence and have doubts about their own capabilities; additionally, women who are at early stages of their career they can lose their motivation to go further because they would believe that it is not possible to be a successful woman leader. Male participant think that public attitudes don't influence women, and he believes that "after about 20 years' men going to face with that problem."

Possible measures

All participants believe that there are certain ways to address the lack of female representation in positions of leadership. Female participant suggests that promoting women's representation may be achieved via methods such as increasing public awareness and advertising, conducting trainings, seminars, and leadership programs. She thinks that implementing flexible work hours may assist women in achieving a better work-life balance, while establishing peer mentorship programs can facilitate the exchange of best practices among female coworkers. These strategies can effectively solve the mentioned setback. Female participant expressed strategies which can be effective in addressing this issue, such as the need to raise awareness and encourage education, involve women in various fields of work to ensure diversity, show and emphasize success stories to inspire young women, and empower women in organizations by promoting shared responsibilities and equal benefits. Male participant believes that the political faculties of universities should be responsible for shaping public attitudes towards gender equality. According to his viewpoint, if there is an equal representation of women and men in certain university faculties, it would naturally reduce the issue of gender inequality. Male participant stated that “everything starts from family, if a little girl sees that her parents gives more authority and care to their boy, it means starting `the match 1-0 behind”.

Attitudes and perception held by males

Male participants mentioned that they are familiar with the existing state of women's participation in leadership positions in Azerbaijan. Male participant said that in Azerbaijan women mostly choose or are forced to work in education or medical jobs. It is a common belief that when talk about women and leadership people will usually think of the director of one of the schools or hospitals. Male participant think that the percent of women are occupying of influential positions in the country is not more that 20–25.

When it comes to increasing gender diversity in leadership positions, male participant strongly believes that women managers may help companies and employees to solve social life and work balance problems. Male participant said that “women should also have the same rights as men.” Both of them believe that potential effects on males if there is an increase in the representation of women in leadership positions will be positive. Additionally, male participant think that “it may help workplaces to become more colorful”, and other male participant put it as “there will not be any negative effects. The situation will even help the male workers to be more productive and responsible”.

The question about there will be any prospective advantages or obstacles for males in an increase in the representation of women in leadership positions, male participant underscored that he “doesn’t support families that both parents (full time) work and don’t spend time with their children and children may suffer from lack of care”. Male participant see it as “the situation will create more advantages than obstacles since in labor market, there are many choices for men to choose”. Besides, other male participant added that “It is generally accepted by Azerbaijani people that men are better than women in senior positions”, and he believes that “in our culture, the main responsibilities of women are childcare and housework”.

Discussion

It should be noted that the majority of the findings are in line with the existing literature. The correlation between family responsibilities and the limited representation of women in high-ranking government roles aligns with the revised research. As stated by Maguire (2018), the ongoing involvement of women in taking on caregiving and domestic duties is a substantial obstacle, particularly for younger women and those with young children. Shame (2015) noted that in comparison to males, female politicians often begin a career at a later age, have a fewer number of children, allocate more time to familial responsibilities, and structure their lives to minimize commute time, as opposed to their male counterparts. The limits imposed by societal norms, such as marriage, child-bearing, and specific job expectations, are often seen to impede a woman's advancement as a manager and hinder their potential to reach higher levels (Marinakou, 2015). Women are mostly seen

as spouses and mothers, which reinforces gender segregation; consequently, women are expected to marry and reproduce in order to attain social standing (Marinakou, 2015).

According to Toh and Leonardelli (2012), cultures that are stricter and rigid will have a lower proportion of women in high-level leadership roles. The preconceptions of gender inequality are strongly established, to the extent that the traits necessary for success in a managerial role have been mostly linked to males (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011).

“It is not right for women to give work order, instructions, task to men” mentioned by an interviewee is also described in the literature, as there is a belief that managers are often associated with masculine qualities, which leads to the perception that women cannot effectively balance their duties as a wife, mother, and executive; additionally, some individuals may be reluctant to work under the leadership of a female manager (Marinakou, 2015).

One of the women who participated in the study mentioned culture and the geographical location of the country as barriers. Indeed, culture and geographical region are significant elements that influences the growth of female leadership and the presence of women in senior management roles (Moriarty, 2019). According to Eden and Gupta (2017), the limited success of women in senior positions may be attributed to patriarchal societies and negative cultural views towards women and girls.

Findings illustrate that family support for women was emphasized as a permanent issue. The importance of family support in facilitating an individual's successful job growth has been well recognized (Ferguson et al., 2012), and it is apparent that family hold both detrimental and beneficial effects on women's job advancement.

A primary factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior positions is rooted in the historical dominance of patriarchal systems, which have traditionally pushed women to lower positions and maintained the belief in their secondary status (Messaoud & Dajani, 2021). This weakens self-confidence in women and negatively affects their management skills. Women are vulnerable to societal norms that disapprove, penalize, and violate them when they achieve success (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

According to the literature, public attitudes influence the willingness of women to get into leadership positions as well. Most time public think that due to the association of women with communal traits, they are often seen as less appropriate for leadership roles compared to males (Toskhov & Cretti, 2023). As stated by Booysen (2007), women are unwilling about pursuing advancement in their professions because of insufficient training opportunities. The underrepresentation of women in state leadership roles in Azerbaijan has been attributed to a perceived deficit in their expertise and understanding of political processes (ADB, 2005), demand more training and raise awareness as well.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, this research endeavor has the potential to provide valuable contributions towards the development of strategies aimed at reducing this disparity.

The primary obstacles identified in the research encompass prejudices and stereotypes, the complexities of daily life, time constraints and family obligations, lack of motivation, limited resources, lack of self-assurance, inadequate training, etc. It is clear how challenging it is for women to hold senior positions and that it is necessary to take certain steps to eliminate the barriers that stand in their way in order to expect gender balance in decision-making, combat gender stereotypes, and improve the consideration of the gender factor in the decision-making process. Moreover, the dearth of scholarly inquiry in this particular domain, coupled with the failure to explore the underlying factors contributing to this disparity, serves to underscore the imperative nature of doing study in this field.

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