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Girls' education and success in Azerbaijan: comparative document analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of female academic success in Azerbaijan, with a particular emphasis on general education and higher education, against the backdrop of global efforts to enhance girls' education and empower women. Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has exhibited a commitment to gender equality through the adoption of international laws, implementation of gender-based projects and formulation of women's empowerment policies. By scrutinizing the latest national and international documents, including reports, this research evaluates female educational achievements and compares them with historical data, male educational attainment levels and benchmarks from comparable post-Soviet and neighbouring countries. The study reveals a notable upward trajectory in female academic success, surpassing male counterparts in various fields. Despite these achievements, gender disparities persist, positioning Azerbaijan behind similar nations. The research concludes that while female success is strongly linked to education, further efforts are required to address gender imbalances in domains such as politics and safety.

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Introduction

From the inception of the first human civilization, it has been recognized that 'illiteracy and insufficient basic schooling predominantly affect women' (Kalman 2005, 12). Historically, the prioritization of girls' education was not consistent; however, it is widely acknowledged that women who are educated, empowered and motivated have the potential to effect positive transformative changes in the world (Khoja-Moolji 2015). The attainment of education by women holds the promise of achieving numerous milestones and contributing to the overall prosperity of society (Klasen 2002) while concurrently mitigating issues such as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS transmission and undernutrition (Habibov, Barrett, and Chernyak 2017). As articulated by Agayeva (2018), a country or nation's advancement and progress are inexorably linked to women's educational empowerment.^{1,2}

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Towards the conclusion of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, the discourse on girls' education and equality gained prominence in developed nations, formulating various theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations. Recognizing the immense potential of girls and advocating for their complete equality across all domains, many societies, institutions and practitioners underscored the pivotal role of formal schooling as the primary conduit to propel girls towards progress (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Consequently, numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations have invested in initiatives to foster equal, empowered and sustainable girls' education.^{3,4}

Notably, Azerbaijan, as a nation, was mindful of the significance of girls' education long before certain European, American and Islamic world countries. Critical moments in history, such as the inauguration of the initial secular school for Muslim girls in 1901, the establishment of equal voting rights to women in 1919, and the prohibition of early marriages in the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, highlight the nation's early dedication to achieving gender equality. Post-independence in 1991, the Republic of Azerbaijan diligently adopted international laws about gender equality and executed a series of gender-based projects. Aligning with the Global Partnership for Education's Gender Equality Policy and Strategy 2016–2020 (GEPs), gender equality in Azerbaijan is construed as encompassing 'equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women, men, girls, and boys, and equal power to shape their own lives and contribute to society' (Global Partnership for Education 2019, 6). Furthermore, the nation embraced policies empowering women and ratified a comprehensive array of international documents safeguarding women's rights (Gul 2021).

In line with the belief that the best equality manifests through education, fostering economic development, opportunities, health, survival and political empowerment (Klasen 2002), this study scrutinizes national and international documents to delineate female educational achievements in general education and Higher Education. In light of the historical context and the global efforts to promote girls' education and gender equality, this study contributes significantly to the field by comprehensively examining female educational achievements in Azerbaijan. By scrutinizing the latest national and international documents from 2018 to 2023, the research sheds light on the progress made in general education and Higher Education for women in the country. This analysis is crucial for understanding the impact of educational policies, initiatives and international frameworks on the advancement of women in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the study contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on gender equality as it explores the intersectionality of education with economic development, opportunities, health, survival and political empowerment (Manijeh 1999). By addressing the unique historical trajectory of Azerbaijan's commitment to girls' education and its alignment with contemporary global initiatives, this research adds a nuanced perspective to the ongoing dialogue on empowering women through education. Ultimately, the findings of this study hold the potential to inform future policies, programmes and interventions aimed at advancing gender equality in education, not only in Azerbaijan but also in a broader international context.

This research holds paramount importance as it thoroughly examines the present state of Azerbaijani girls' education, providing invaluable insights through the meticulous analysis of relevant documents. The study serves as a pivotal contribution to the advancement of the status of Azerbaijani girls by shedding light on the nuanced dynamics and challenges within the realm of education. Through comprehensive document analysis,

this research endeavours to enhance the understanding of the factors influencing girls' education in Azerbaijan, thereby facilitating informed policy decisions, targeted interventions and scholarly discourse aimed at fostering educational equity and empowerment for the female population in the country.

The primary objective of this document analysis is to scrutinize whether there has been an enhancement in the equality and education rates of Azerbaijani girls/women in the last five years. Rather than presenting numerical data that may be subject to fluctuations, this research aims to offer a comparative assessment, highlighting improvements in relevant areas since the signing of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW) in 1995. The focus is on discerning the impact of diverse policies, laws, training initiatives and investments implemented by the Azerbaijani government over the past fifteen years to eradicate various forms of segregation and discrimination. By doing so, the research seeks to elucidate the progress made in fostering equality and opportunities for female citizens for the last five years. Furthermore, this study provides insights into the state of girls' education in Azerbaijan compared to analogous countries (e.g., through history, geography, religion, socioeconomic level, etc.).

Theoretical framework

Focusing on gender equality and girls' education (i.e., schooling) in Azerbaijan, there are limited prevailing theoretical models such as feminism, patriarchy and the cult of motherhood. However, the motivational theory of role models by Merton (1957) is particularly applicable, as historically, Azerbaijan has had female individuals who serve as examples of behaviour, possibility and inspiration. Gauntlett (2002) describes a role model as 'someone to look up to and base your character, values, and aspirations on' (211), meaning that authentic role models inspire self-belief, exemplify success and encourage goal-setting. Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters (2015) emphasize that 'role aspiring motivation is central to the main outcomes of role modelling – goal adoption, goal reinforcement, and achievement' (468). These theories of motivation are crucial for understanding girls' education and equality, focusing on role modelling's impact on motivation and goal achievement. Goals are conceptualized as the endpoint of educational attainment and opportunities, particularly for female education and equality.

This paper suggests utilizing role modelling and 'liberal humanist ideas about education' (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 91). Azerbaijani schoolchildren are inspired by historical figures such as Mahsati Ganjavi (poetess), Khurshudbani Natavan (poet and philanthropist), Sara Khatun (diplomat), Hanifa Malikova (educator), Nigar Shikhlinskaya (nurse), Hamida Mammadguluzada (activist), Ayna Sultanova (statesperson) and Salatin Asgarova (journalist), who are celebrated for their bravery, intelligence and hard work. These examples motivate young women to strive toward their goals, demonstrating that success is possible despite challenges. Post-independence, figures like Lala Shovkat, who served as the head of the Secretary of State, and Sahiba Gafarova, the Speaker of the National Assembly, among others, have continued to serve as role models for equality. In 2017, Mehriban Aliyeva became the vice president of Azerbaijan, 'the highest-ranking woman official in the history of Azerbaijan' (Agayeva 2018, 12), advocating for women, children, health and education nationally and internationally. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation, founded by Aliyeva, serves as a testament to her inspirational role. In conclusion,

the achievements of these Azerbaijani women have created role models that inspire young women to pursue and achieve their goals. Role models are thus defined as individuals who inspire and motivate others through their values, behaviour, successful outcomes and national aspirations.

Literature review

History of girls' literacy and women's rights in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, one of the three South Caucasus countries, encompasses both secular and religious societies (Cornell 2011). Upholding a statehood that originated a century ago, this nation boasts a population exceeding ten million as of 2022, with a notable gender distribution in favour of women, and is rich with natural and manufactured resources. Described as a post-Soviet, moderate-income nation with a high human development index (Hunner-Kreisel et al. 2022), Azerbaijan takes pride in its rich history, highlighted by accomplished women poetesses, actresses, writers, doctors, composers, artists and other notable figures with global recognition.

Since the early twentieth century, education and literacy have consistently been primary objectives for Azerbaijani intellectuals (Gozalova 2014). Following an oil boom and foreign investments at the onset of the twentieth century, the capital city, Baku, underwent rapid development facilitated by the efforts of Azerbaijani magnates and philanthropists, ultimately contributing to the emergence of a literate and intellectually empowered populace (Jabbarov n.d.). Notably, in 1901, Baku witnessed the inauguration of the first secular school for Muslim girls globally, initiated by the renowned Azerbaijani philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev (Agayeva 2018). By 1915, Baku hosted five Muslim girls' schools, offering mathematics, geography, music, drama and language classes. The period saw the emergence of a new intellectual class, evidenced by newspapers promoting Western education. In 1911, the women's newspaper 'Isiq' (Light) was established in Baku, advocating for women's education and rights. Numerous exploratory works (Agayeva 2018; Huseyin 2016; Jabbarov n.d.) provide valuable insights into the initial secular education of Azerbaijani girls and women's rights, offering compelling reading material.

Azerbaijan gained international recognition for its significant achievements during its brief democratic period as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic from 1918 to 1920. The introduction of universal suffrage in 1919 marked a historic moment, 'making Azerbaijan the first Muslim-majority country to enfranchise women' (Swietochowski 1985, 144). This period was characterized by intense rhetoric on women's emancipation and support (Tohidi 1998). Discussions on gender equality were prominent during the inaugural session of the parliament in 1918, according to the UNDP report (2007). During the ADR government, despite the establishment of Baku State University in 1919 and sending a hundred students abroad for higher education, regrettably, none of them were women. However, women's literacy rates rose significantly as part of the broader Soviet educational initiative, Likbez (elimination of illiteracy) (Heyat 2002, 2006, 2008; Tohidi 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004). Throughout the Soviet Union, women's literacy increased from 12.5% to 72.5%, symbolizing a transformative period where Azerbaijani women shed traditional veils, engaged actively in various aspects of life, and played crucial roles during World War II.

During the period of governance by the then Soviet Union, women's equal participation in the economy and education system was normalized, and female illiteracy was eradicated. Under these changes, women gained new economic roles but maintained their higher responsibility for domestic tasks and family matters. (Asian Development Bank 2019, 55)

Behind all these improvements lay forced Russification, atheism, mass repression and prosecution (Library of Congress n.d.).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan confronted the imperative of reconstructing its national identity. In the initial five years of independence, Azerbaijani women faced numerous challenges due to the armed conflict with Armenia, precipitating political, economic and social crises (Habibov, Barrett, and Chernyak 2017). Nonetheless, in 1992, the Azerbaijani government embraced the Convention on the Rights of the Child, stipulating the minimum age for marriage as 18. Despite the burdens imposed by the Azerbaijan-Armenian war, particularly in Nagorno Karabakh, the commitment to gender equality persisted, and Azerbaijani women, amidst considerable difficulties, managed to sustain a degree of equality in society.

The 1995 Azerbaijan Constitution (The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan 1995), acclaimed for its progressive and equitable stance, was regarded as more forward-thinking than the constitutions of Iran, Türkiye and other Muslim and non-Muslim nations (Tohidi 1999). Consequently, in 1995, 'the rights of women and men were enshrined in the national constitution, with Azerbaijan ratifying the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)' (UNDP Azerbaijan 2007, 5). Joining the Council of Europe on Gender Equality in 2001, Azerbaijan further solidified its commitment. The year 2006 marked the enforcement of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 'On Guarantees of Gender Equality', which sought to eradicate any instances of discrimination based on gender and promote equal opportunities for individuals of all genders across various aspects of life (Baskakova 2012).

Overall, we can say that the 1990s was a period marked by vulnerability and disadvantage for women and children, including one million refugees and Internally Displaced People. Nearly ten percent of girls were not enrolled in primary school, and dropout rates exceeded those of boys until 1998 (Hodges 2018). UNICEF identified four primary reasons for this disparity: 'financial difficulties, perceptions of girls as more susceptible to physical and cultural risks, beliefs in divergent mental abilities, and early marriages influenced by religious convictions or societal desirability' (Hodges 2018, 4).

In the new millennium, as a European-oriented, post-Soviet and developing nation endowed with abundant natural resources, the Azerbaijani government directed efforts towards advancing girls' education and empowering women. Numerous projects and policies centred on gender equality were instituted, accompanied by extensive research on gender subjects. A pivotal focus of these initiatives was to enhance girls' participation in nontraditional fields of study, such as STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics), thereby dismantling gender stereotypes and mitigating professional segregation.

Laws and policies on women's equal rights

The discourse on achieving gender parity in education has been a focal point in Azerbaijan since the establishment of political stability, representing a challenge that is not

insurmountable. Both governmental entities and private stakeholders have implemented diverse measures to foster equal opportunities for girls and increase the enrolment of female students at non-mandatory educational levels like undergraduate and graduate. Distinguished by ethnic origin, culture, language, development and religion from its neighbouring countries, Azerbaijan has consistently embraced novel policies concerning the equality and equity of girls' education. Since 1999, the Ministry of Education has collaborated with the World Bank to enhance the effectiveness of educational environments and instructional processes (The World Bank 2010). Presently, individuals from Azerbaijan's education sector actively participate in the activities of international organizations, including UNESCO, UNICEF, UNEVOC, IESCO, the European Educational Fund, the Council of Europe and the European Union (Samadova 2016). Additionally, the government has provided extensive platforms for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to raise awareness and promote literacy for girls.

The State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs of Azerbaijan Republic (SCFWCA), established in 1998 as the State Committee on Women's Affairs, plays a pivotal role in safeguarding women's rights. The committee actively integrates gender considerations into state policies, programmes and laws, and it played a crucial role in establishing information systems to monitor gender-related aspects (Asian Development Bank 2019) in collaboration with UNICEF, a 2008 study conducted by the SCFWCA investigated child marriages and their impact on education (Girls not Brides 2014). Noteworthy initiatives, such as training over 5500 girls and women in rural areas, have been implemented from 2011 to 2018, providing them with experience in leading businesses and entrepreneurship (UNDP 2007).

Since 2004, the State Statistical Committee (SSC) has undertaken crucial initiatives to collect and disseminate gender-related statistics. The annual 'Women and Men' report systematically compiles relevant information from administrative documents, various surveys and population counts. The SSC's website features a section for gender statistics, offering data on demographics, the labour market, education, health and other sectors (Asian Development Bank 2019).

Despite the commendable efforts and achievements in advancing girls' education and promoting gender equality in Azerbaijan, a discernible gap exists in the literature regarding the persisting challenges women face in accessing and progressing through various levels of education. While the historical overview outlined in the literature review provides insights into Azerbaijan's commitment to gender equality and women's education, there is a need for more contemporary and granular studies that delve into the current impediments hindering the realization of educational equality. Specifically, the existing literature predominantly emphasizes policy frameworks, institutional collaborations, and statistical data, often overlooking the nuanced sociocultural factors, stereotypes and barriers women encounter in educational environments. Additionally, there is a lack of research exploring the differential impact of policies on various subgroups of women, such as those from marginalized communities or rural areas. Addressing this gap in the literature is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies that effectively address the multifaceted challenges women in Azerbaijan face, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. This research aims to fill this void by examining the reports and searching for progression

in Azerbaijan, offering valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners in the field of girls' education and gender equality.

Girls' education worldwide in the twenty-first century

Over the past three decades, significant strides have been made in girls' education across developing nations, a trend underscored by the Global Campaign for Education in 2003. The effective implementation of girls' education initiatives in various developing countries provides numerous examples of successful policy strategies and essential governance structures required for achieving educational milestones (Lincove 2006). Prioritizing girls' education and implementing targeted interventions have proven successful in enhancing girls' school enrolment rates (Tembon and Fort 2008). However, education quality and consistency are influenced by various factors, including economic growth, agricultural productivity and improved job opportunities (Herz and Sperling 2004; Sperling and Winthrop 2015). These factors collectively contribute to shaping the educational landscape for girls in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, despite numerous efforts and initiatives, challenges persist in achieving complete parity in girls' education (King and Winthrop 2015). Particularly in regions marked by ongoing national, religious and cultural hostilities, girls and their access to education are profoundly affected (Lewis and Lockheed 2007). These challenges are exacerbated by entrenched gender biases and societal norms that undervalue girls' education (Mensch and Lloyd 1998). However, there exist solutions and methods to reduce school dropout rates, increase school enrolment, encourage participation and ensure successful graduation for girls. Interventions such as targeted scholarships, community outreach programmes and comprehensive curriculum reforms have shown promise in overcoming barriers to girls' education (Bruns, Mingat, and Rakotomalala 2011; Hallman 2005). Moreover, fostering supportive environments within schools and communities through teacher training and parental engagement initiatives can significantly enhance educational outcomes for girls (UNESCO 2020). By addressing these multifaceted challenges with evidence-based strategies, progress towards achieving equitable access to education for all girls can be accelerated.

The primary inquiry at the core of this study is as follows:

- (1) What is the contemporary assessment of the status of girls' education in Azerbaijan?
- (2) What insights can be gleaned regarding the present condition of girls' education in Azerbaijan?

Methods

We employed document analysis as a valuable research methodology to examine the current state of education and literacy among Azerbaijani girls. The utilization of document analysis in Azerbaijan is notably limited, with sparse existing literature focused on this approach. This study adopted qualitative methods, involving the interpretation of historical and cultural backgrounds and experiences. Data were gathered from pre-existing

sources, encompassing recent national and international reports, publications, materials and various documents.

Document/content analysis, mainly when applied to public records, presents numerous advantages contributing to its suitability for academic research. Firstly, it offers unrestricted access to vast online data sources, ensuring researchers can gather comprehensive information without geographical limitations (Morgan 2022). This accessibility is crucial for conducting comparative and cross-cultural studies, as Bowen (2009) highlighted, as it enables researchers to examine documents from diverse contexts and regions. Additionally, document analysis provides valuable historical and cultural insights over time, facilitating a deeper understanding of societal phenomena (Bowen 2009). This aspect aligns with the requirements of our research, where historical and cultural perspectives are integral to our investigation. Lastly, document analysis is considered a relatively precise research method when conducted meticulously, enhancing the credibility and reliability of study findings (Bowen 2009). Overall, the application of document analysis in our research ensures methodological rigour and contributes to a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. However, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, such as restricted access to content, biased selectivity and the potential for subjective interpretation.

Sample and data collection

We acquired the most recent publications available and secondary data, prioritizing each document's authenticity, credibility and representativeness. Within each record, specific attention was dedicated solely to chapters addressing education, mainly focusing on the female education rate in Azerbaijan. A total of thirteen reports were selected for inclusion, comprising eight international reports and five national reports, all of which were obtained from official websites:

- (1) Asian Development Bank, Azerbaijan Country Gender Assessment, 2019.
- (2) OECD, PISA 2022 International Assessments.
- (3) PIRLS 2021 International Results in Reading.
- (4) State Examination Centre, Scientific-Statistical Analysis of the Final Exam Results on Students' Admission to Higher and Secondary Outstanding Educational Institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Public Education Institutions for the 2022–2023 academic year.
- (5) State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Women and Men in Azerbaijan, Statistical Yearbook, Azerbaijan, 2022.
- (6) The Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (MSE), Annual Report, 2021.
- (7) The State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Final Country Report on the Progress achieved and Challenges faced during implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Programme of Action, Beijing +25, Baku, 2019.
- (8) TIMSS 2019 International Results in Mathematics and Science.
- (9) UN Children's Fund. Country Program Document, Azerbaijan, 2021.
- (10) UNDP, Azerbaijan Human Development Report, 2021/2022.

- (11) UNFPA, Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan: Current Situation and Possibilities. Report on the results of the Survey of Men's Attitudes to Gender Equality, International Centre for Social Research and the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs, Baku, 2018.
- (12) UNICEF, Country Office Annual Report, Azerbaijan, 2022.
- (13) World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2023.

Data analysis methods

The data analysis methods adopted for this study were centred on leveraging the capabilities of NVivo, a robust qualitative data analysis software. NVivo was a pivotal tool for gathering, importing, analysing, visualizing and sharing the diverse datasets collected during the research process. Triangulation, a fundamental qualitative research technique, was employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Within the NVivo program, triangulation involves comparing two or more data sources addressing the same subject. This process facilitated the identification of patterns, themes and divergences, offering a nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon.

Our document analysis process involved several steps to ensure a thorough examination of the research topic. First, we carefully selected relevant documents based on their content and credibility. Then, we organized the information by focusing on key aspects like girls' education, literacy, achievements and gender disparities. Next, we created a coding system to sort the data into different themes. We also checked for any biases in the documents and removed any that might affect our analysis.

After coding and organizing the data, we grouped the findings into categories to understand the trends and patterns better. This helped us present the results in a clear and structured way. Overall, our approach to document analysis was systematic and rigorous, ensuring the reliability of our findings.

Findings

In contrast to the 90s, most scrutinized latest reports indicate that women from the newer generation exhibit more significant activity in various domains, including education, employment and family responsibilities, compared to their older counterparts. Consequently, each analysed piece was systematically assessed based on the following categorization: Girls' Educational Status in Kindergarten-11th Grades, International School Assessments, the Transition from Secondary School to Higher Education, Higher Education Enrolment and Educational Attainment Overview.

Girls' educational status in kindergarten-11th grades

Upon thorough document analysis, a nuanced overview emerges concerning the educational landscape for girls in the Kindergarten-11th grade spectrum. Notably, boys tend to outnumber girls in preschool educational institutions, with a distribution of 47.0% for girls and 53.2% for boys in 2021. The prevalence of boys in elementary levels, colleges and public educational institutions has been evident since independence. However, a

pivotal intervention, the School Readiness Programme implemented by the Azerbaijani government in 2016, led to a notable increase in enrolment for 5-year-olds of both genders, reaching 75%, compared to 65% in 2017 (Asian Development Bank 2019).

Examining the trajectory of girl pupils from first to fifth grade, there has been a commendable increase from 96.6% in 2000 to 99.7% in 2021. According to the Asian Development Bank (2019), the completion rate for primary education escalated from 92.8% to 100% from 2000 to 2015, with boys achieving 100% and girls 99.9%. An additional international report (UN 2021) indicates an equal primary school enrolment rate of 92.4% for both genders, with notable improvement observed for children with disabilities. Comparison with World Bank statistics reveals that Azerbaijan's school enrolment reached its zenith at 94% in 2021, surpassing Armenia (89%) but falling short of Georgia (100%) (The World Bank 2022).

A reported 91% female enrolment marks the progression to lower secondary education for 2017. UNESCO (2018) underscores substantial growth in the nation's primary and secondary education system in recent decades, with the MSE annual report for 2021 indicating that girls exhibit a higher overall average success rate than boys in the National Assessment. The State Statistical Committee reports a 99.9% educational attainment for men and 99.7% for women among the population aged 15 and over. Additionally, the State Examination Centre (SEC) analysis reveals that girls in both 9th and 11th grades outperform boys in language and mathematics (SEC 2023).

According to the Ministry of Science and Education's 2021 Annual Report, the VI Republican Subject Olympiads saw participation from 11,903 girls and 10,628 boys. Instituted in 2018 and conducted across all grades 9–11, the competition produced 45 female winners out of 150 participants (30%). Moreover, in the International Olympiads involving 55 participants, 45 emerged victorious, comprising ten girls and 35 boys. The Lotfi Zadeh Logic Olympiad featured 17 winning girls and 43 boys. While these competitions offer insights, the Ministry's report lacks comprehensive information on gender distribution in general education.

International assessments

Azerbaijan has actively participated in an international assessment conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since the onset of the new millennium. This assessment includes the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which focuses on evaluating the proficiency of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and science. Additionally, Azerbaijan has engaged in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), conducted every five years and targeted 4th-grade students in the same subjects. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has outlined plans to partake in the International Computer and Information Literacy Survey (ICILS, also run by the IEA) in 2023 and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS, run by the OECD) in 2024, both for the first time.

Azerbaijan's involvement in the PISA assessments occurred in 2006, 2009, 2018 (limited to Baku) and 2022 (also limited to Baku), focusing on 15-year-olds. A thorough examination of all PISA international reports, particularly the recently published 2022 edition,

reveals that female students in the capital city outperformed their male counterparts in all three subjects. In 2022, girls, with a score difference of +38, demonstrated higher reading scores than boys; however, these scores trailed behind the averages for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Compared to neighbouring countries, the mean score of students' results from Baku from reading and science subjects was below that of all post-soviet countries except Uzbekistan.

Another noteworthy international assessment, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), was conducted in Azerbaijan in 2011 and 2019, exclusively targeting 4th-grade students. Notably, Azerbaijan is set to participate in the 2023 edition with representatives from both 4th and 8th grades. The TIMSS scale average centre point was standardized at 500. The 2019 results reveal that Azerbaijani students in the 4th grade demonstrated proficiency in Mathematics, scoring 515, surpassing the performance of several countries, including Kazakhstan, Italy, Canada, Spain, Armenia, Georgia and Iran. Intriguingly, Azerbaijani girls achieved a higher score (517) than their male counterparts (514), positioning the country among the top eight nations, particularly in numerical and data comprehension as well as application and reasoning components. In 2011, Azerbaijani elementary school students scored 463 (466 for girls, 460 for boys), outperforming Armenia, Georgia and the Islamic Republic of Iran in Math.

Additionally, Azerbaijan's TIMSS science scores stood at 427, trailing behind all neighbouring countries in 2019. However, in 2011, students scored 438 (442 for girls, 434 for boys). Notably, in 2019, girls (429) outperformed boys (425) across all content domains, including life science, physical science and earth science, as well as in the areas of knowing, applying and reasoning. The results for 2023 are not yet publicly available.

In the realm of reading literacy, Azerbaijan participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2011, 2016 and 2021, targeting fourth-grade students. PIRLS utilizes an average scale score of 500, and Azerbaijan consistently scored below this benchmark in all three instances. The PIRLS 2021 results were obtained during the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reading assessment scores for Azerbaijani fourth-grade students fluctuated across the three years, declining from 472 in 2016 to 441 in 2021 (see [Table 1](#)). Despite this decline, both children (67% of girls and 60% of boys) and parents expressed strong enjoyment of reading.

In summary, the most notable performance in international assessments was exhibited by 4th-grade students in Mathematics in 2019. However, the outcomes of other assessments consistently remained below the average, and in the case of reading literacy and science, exhibited a decline when compared to neighbouring countries. Despite these trends, elementary and high school girls consistently outperformed boys in the abovementioned subjects.

Table 1. PIRLS assessment results of Azerbaijani students for three years.

	2011	2016	2021
Overall	463	472	441
Boys	456	466	432
Girls	470	479	450

Source: Mullis et al. (2023).

The transition from secondary school to higher education

The State Examination Centre annually releases a comprehensive report detailing the outcomes for both male and female candidates. Commencing the analysis of admission differentials between boys and girls involves considering the scores from the secondary school leaving exams. In 2022, 18.6% of high school graduates opted not to pursue further education, with a notable disparity of 67% boys and 33% girls. According to the SEC Report of 2023, among high school graduates desiring to continue their education, 53.1% of boys and 46.9% of girls participated in school-leaving exams and applied for undergraduate programmes, while 30.5% were unsuccessful in securing admission.

In Azerbaijan undergraduate admission, there are five groups. The categorization of admission groups is as follows: Group I includes Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and Agricultural fields. Group II encompasses the Business, Marketing and Tourism disciplines. Group III involves academic areas like Philology, Translation, International Relations and Sociology. Group IV covers all medical faculties, including veterinary studies. Finally, Group V comprises disciplines in Art, Music, Cinema, Sculpture and related fields. Among those who applied to undergraduate programmes categorized into groups I–IV, 60.89% of girls and 39.11% of boys attained admission. Notably, for applicants to Group V, which necessitates exceptional talent, 34.3% of boys and 65.7% of girls successfully secured admission. The data in [Figure 1](#) delineates the number of girls and boys admitted to undergraduate programmes.

According to the latest report from the State Examination Centre (SEC), there was an equal number of girls and boys who submitted applications for undergraduate admission in 2022, although there was a higher proportion of girls in the Russian sector compared to the Azerbaijani sector (The ‘Russian sector’ in education typically refers to educational institutions or programmes where Russian is the primary language of instruction, often found in countries with significant Russian-speaking populations or in regions influenced by Russian culture and language). Upon closer examination, girls dominated the III and IV groups, encompassing humanitarian and medical fields. Moreover, girls demonstrated superior performance in mathematics, the Azerbaijani language, and all foreign

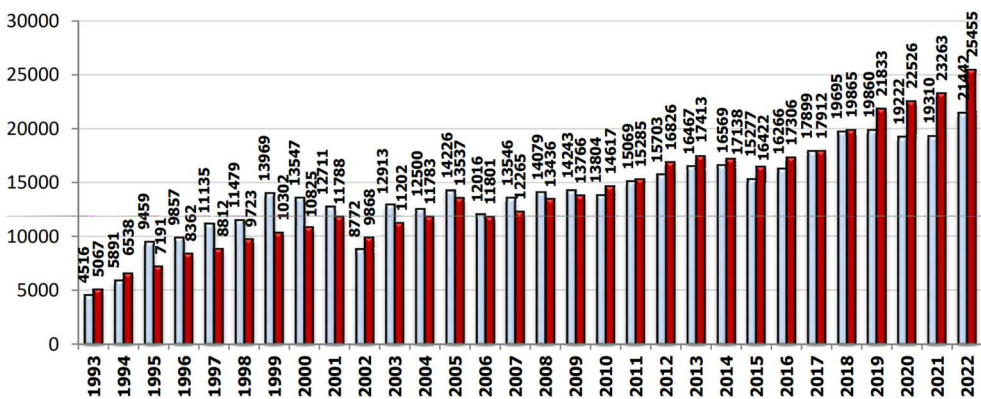


Figure 1. Dynamics of admitted boys and girls during thirty years.

Source: Publication on State Examination Centre of the Republic of Azerbaijan’s Annual Report, 2023.

languages in the school-leaving exam in 2022 compared to boys. In the university admission exam, girls from the Azerbaijani section excelled in Azerbaijan language, literature, mathematics, physics and chemistry questions, while boys performed well in biology, history and geography assessments.

The SEC Report for 2023 reveals that girls are more prevalent in receiving state scholarships (51.66%) than boys (48.34%), and they achieved higher points (i.e., 500–700) more than boys (4039 girls compared to 3039 boys). Girls also dominated undergraduate admission in major cities such as Baku, Sumgayit, Nakhichevan, Ganja and Mingachevir. These findings suggest a departure from the longstanding trend where boys outnumbered girls. Similarly, this shift is evident in college admission, with girls securing more admissions and scholarships.

The SEC reports a notable presence of girls (52%) among master's degree applicants, resulting in 50.1% of admitted students being girls and 49.3% being boys. However, in 2022, 48.8% of girls received state scholarships. Likewise, the trend continues in residential admissions, with 31.9% of girls who applied succeeding compared to 21.9% of boys.

Higher education enrolment

The enrolment rate of high school graduates into undergraduate programmes has significantly improved. According to the Asian Development Bank (2019), the enrolment rate for colleges and universities in Azerbaijan was initially low for both genders, approximately 20%. However, based on the SEC report, this percentage has increased from 20%, with 44.74% of high school graduates in 2022 successfully gaining admission. This information is corroborated by the World Bank report, indicating a tertiary enrolment rate of 40% in Azerbaijan.

In reference to the UNDP report 2007, it was noted that in 2005, 47% of female and 53% of male students were enrolled in higher education institutions. However, the UNDP report highlighted that mothers tend to be more supportive of their daughter's education at the bachelor's and master's degree levels compared to fathers. Furthermore, Baskakova (2012) observed a decreasing trend in the number of female students as educational degrees progress. Recent statistics reveal increased female participation in undergraduate and graduate degree completion post-2020s.

An analysis of the higher education sector by the State Statistical Committee (2022) indicates that female students constitute 62% of the total enrolment. The 2021/2022 academic year data demonstrates a higher percentage of women in fields such as education, humanities and social sciences, culture and art, health, welfare and services. This data underscores a clear gender-based preference among applicants for various professions.

Further examination of the higher education landscape reveals that women PhD students predominate in disciplines such as Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Medicine, Anthropology, Geography, History, Philology, Pedagogies, Psychology, Arts, Sociology, Architecture and Philosophy, accounting for 54.9% of the total. According to the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs report (2019), 56% of current doctoral candidates are women, with 51% of PhD lecturers being women. The State Statistical Committee's report for 2022 marks a historic milestone for Azerbaijan, as, for the first time, women with PhD degrees outnumbered men (See [Figure 2](#)).

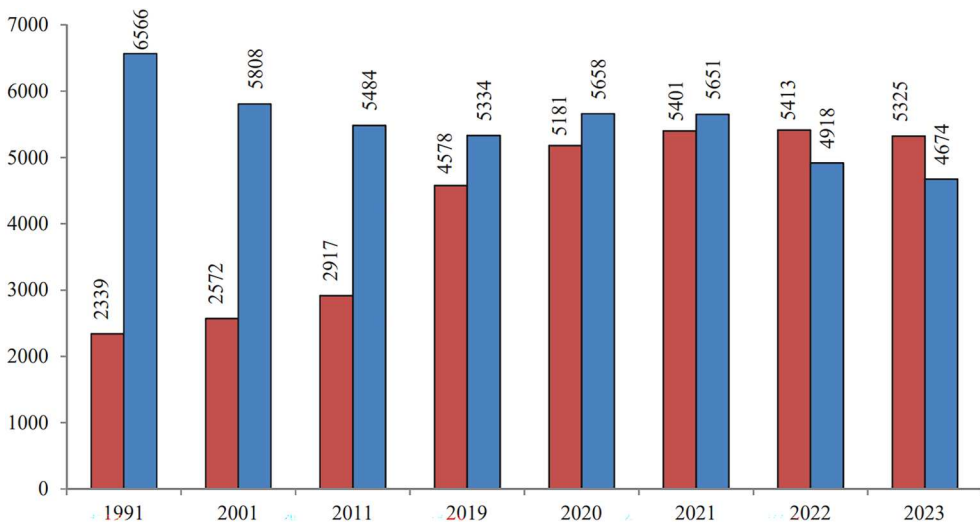


Figure 2. Distribution of PhD by sex during various years.

Source: State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022.

Since the 2000s, young individuals, including females, have actively sought exchange programmes or pursued education abroad, anticipating enhanced job prospects and language proficiency. As per the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs report (2019), it is noted that 30% of students sent abroad for study between 2007 and 2015 were women. In line with information obtained from the 2019–2023 state programme through direct communication, women constituted 45% of all PhD candidates studying abroad with state funding. Notably, the 2022–2026 state programme reflects a balanced distribution between male and female candidates seeking bachelor's and master's degrees in the first round of applications in 2022.

Educational attainment overview

In alignment with the mandates outlined by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee), Azerbaijan consistently adapts, revises and modernizes its laws to meet international obligations concerning gender equality.

An examination of the recently released World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report (2023) reveals Azerbaijan's ranking at 97th out of 146 in the overall ranking, with a score of 0.692. Notably, Azerbaijan surpasses nations such as China, Japan, Türkiye and Iran but lags behind neighbouring countries like Georgia and Russia. However, when specifically considering educational attainment, Azerbaijan exhibits more favourable results, securing the 54th place with a score of 0.996. This educational achievement surpasses countries including Italy, Austria, Singapore, Belarus, Germany, Türkiye and Portugal.

Delving further into educational metrics, Azerbaijan claims the top spot in enrolment for both primary and tertiary education, achieving a perfect score of 1.000. Refer to [Figure 3](#) for a detailed overview of these findings.



Figure 3. Global gender gap index indicators.

Source: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2023.

As per the UNDP [2022](#) report, Azerbaijan holds the 91st position in the Human Development Index for the year 2021, registering a value of 0.745, indicative of high human development. This places Azerbaijan in the company of nations like Turkmenistan, Algeria and Tonga, which share a similar index. However, Azerbaijan exhibits a notable gender inequality index of 0.294, surpassing figures observed in Georgia (0.280) and Tajikistan (0.285). The educational inequality in 2021 is reported at 3.6%, a percentage higher than that recorded in Turkmenistan, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, signalling an area that requires attention rather than accomplishment.

Azerbaijan demonstrates parity in the projected 'duration of schooling' (13.6/man-13.4/woman) and 'average years of schooling' (10.2/man and 10.9/woman) with figures closely aligning at. The population aged 25 and older with 'at least some secondary education' in 2021 comprises 93.6% females and 97.6% males.

The Institute of Professional Development of Educational Workers has undertaken the training of over ninety thousand teachers in gender equality and women's rights.

The #GirlsCan Campaign has also reached sixteen thousand individuals, providing insights into girls' career choices and motivations (UNICEF [2022](#)). Noteworthy achievements include the substantial reduction in the number of girls married before age 18, plummeting from over 5000 in 2011 to a mere 338 in 2018, attributed to government measures (UN [2021](#)).

Discussion

Inspired by Ahearn's (2001) concept of societies undergoing continuous transformation, this study delves into the examination of literacy, education and equality among Azerbaijani women within the intricate tapestry of cultural, sociopolitical and historical

dimensions. Employing a comprehensive approach, we scrutinized this subject by juxtaposing it with both national and international reports, considering male counterparts, and drawing parallels with analogous nations when applicable. The discourse presented in the document analysis reflects a discernible narrowing of gender gaps, particularly within the past five years (Heyat 2006). Notably, Azerbaijan has experienced a significant metamorphosis, prominently observed in the realm of girls' education across various levels (Gul 2021). The literacy rate, in particular, exhibits a noteworthy upward trajectory, nearing a state of near-perfection. As the report by UNDP in 2007 shows,

Since the period of the Azerbaijani Enlightenment (end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries) and further, in the course of the Soviet period, Azerbaijani society passed a more thorny and steep path of changing the traditional stereotypes of a women's image and behavior than men's (41).

The primary inquiry at the core of this study was as follows: What is the contemporary assessment of the status of girls' education in Azerbaijan? And through thoroughly examining national and international reports via document analysis, what insights can be gleaned regarding the present condition of girls' education in Azerbaijan? Aligned with the global trajectory towards gender equality in Azerbaijan, a substantial transformation has transpired in the educational landscape, manifesting as a pronounced surge in the enrolment of girls across various academic tiers over the past fifteen years. This shift has resulted in a discernible asymmetrical skewness, with girls surpassing boys across diverse educational realms, notably making remarkable strides in STEM disciplines, a phenomenon uncommon globally (Seyidzade and Ismanovski 2020).

Girls in elementary schools have exhibited commendable performance in international assessments, particularly in reading and science, compared to their male counterparts. However, it is imperative to note that the outcomes for both genders have failed to reach an inspiring threshold, except for TIMSS, where yearly results consistently fell below the global average.

Contrary to Baskakova's (2012) assertions, Azerbaijan has effectively achieved parity between boys and girls in both general and professional education. The nation has made notable progress in universal primary education and life expectancy, converging with the averages observed in Europe and Central Asia (Asian Development Bank 2019). Reports from the State Examination Centre underscore the successful participation of girls in graduation and admission exams at various academic levels, both domestically and internationally. Girls have improved exam results, outperforming their male counterparts and securing more scholarships in undergraduate and graduate schools (Alasgarova 2022). The acceptance rate of girls into universities surpasses that of boys across various regions in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, girls have demonstrated increased representation in diverse academic fields.

International assessments like TIMSS-2019 contend that Azerbaijan has achieved educational equality, outpacing countries such as Türkiye, Iran and China, particularly in primary and tertiary education (Mullis et al., 2019). Recent reports challenge the notion that parents are hesitant to send their daughters abroad due to concerns about the potential negative impact of Western culture (Gozalova 2014). On the contrary, data reveals a yearly increase in women's participation in exchange programmes and their successful attainment of scholarships.

In summation, Azerbaijani girls consistently augment their enrolment in preschools, general education and various higher education levels. They exhibit heightened success, particularly in scientific disciplines and humanities. Nevertheless, there is a compelling need for the country to enhance international assessment outcomes for both genders at the elementary and high school levels.

Conclusion and implications

The concept of gender equality, encompassing aspects of agency, choice and control, is intricate and permeates various facets of life, including health, education, livelihoods, safety and community norms. Consequently, our exploration adopts a multifaceted approach, delving into historical heritage, policy implications, geopolitical shifts and document analysis. Our primary objective is framed within the context of ‘the elimination of gender disparities in education’ (USAID 2008, 8), guided by the recognition that achieving gender equality necessitates a comprehensive strategy, acknowledging the roles and relationships between boys and girls and the detrimental gender norms that impede meaningful school participation (USAID 2008).

As articulated by Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel (2008), the twenty-first century witnesses the advantage of girls and women in certain educational aspects, with females outnumbering males in college graduation across many nations. This phenomenon holds for modern Azerbaijan, where the government has consistently progressed towards gender equality in education. Our document analysis aims to scrutinize whether gender equity measures in education have indeed improved, challenging prevailing stereotypes. The data unequivocally indicates significant enhancements across various facets of gender equity in education.

A notable generational shift is evident, with contemporary perspectives diminishing the perception of a girl’s/woman’s primary role as solely a housewife and mother (UNFPA 2018). Consequently, the aspirations for Azerbaijani women extend to literacy, empowerment, education and strength across all domains (Agayeva 2018; Gul 2021; Milagrosa et al. 2020).

However, acknowledging these advancements does not imply the complete attainment of gender literacy and equality in all spheres. A substantial gender disparity exists at birth, with 115.5 boys for every 100 girls, potentially influencing the representation of boys in various fields, including education. Despite positive educational attainments, national and international results reveal persisting challenges in areas such as legislative representation, wage disparities, health issues and survival rates.

The underrepresentation of Azerbaijani women in decision-making roles, particularly in rural areas and small regions, underscores the continued impact of traditions and culture on girls’ personal and employment lives. Egalitarian relationships are gradually gaining ground in capital cities and larger urban areas.

Challenges persist, including declining government funding for education, with expenditures primarily allocated to higher education. Notably, despite the modest spending on education (2.5% of GDP and 7% of public expenditure), substantial improvements have occurred.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan has significantly enhanced girls’ educational equality over the past two decades. The 2021–2025 country programme underscores the commitment to

supporting both genders equally in various fields, aspiring to ensure the survival and thriving of girls and boys to their optimal potential. Future research employing empirical methods should address structural issues such as school engagement types, the nature of girls' learning experiences, how they are treated and the provision of equal opportunities, among other pertinent factors.

The research significantly contributes by challenging prevailing stereotypes and assessing the effectiveness of gender equity measures in education. By scrutinizing national and international data, the study uncovers substantial enhancements in various facets of gender equity in education in Azerbaijan, contributing to the broader discourse on the global advancement of girls and women in educational settings.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality by presenting a holistic view of Azerbaijan's advancements, challenges and evolving perspectives. It serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators and researchers seeking to understand the complex interplay of factors shaping gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of education and beyond.

Limitations and recommendations

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged to provide context for the interpretation of the findings. Firstly, the reliance on document analysis and national and international reports may introduce a potential limitation regarding the comprehensiveness and depth of the data. Additionally, focusing on educational outcomes and enrolment rates may not capture the nuanced experiences and challenges Azerbaijani women face in educational settings. The study predominantly explores statistical reports, potentially skipping an in-depth examination of non-numerical data that could provide richer insights into the dynamics of gender equality in education.

Furthermore, the analysis assumes that the selected documents accurately reflect the current state of girls' education in Azerbaijan. Changes in culture, practices and societal attitudes may not be fully captured within the examined timeframe, introducing a temporal limitation to the study. Moreover, the study primarily relies on secondary data sources, limiting the ability to engage directly with the experiences and perspectives of Azerbaijani women and girls. The absence of primary data collection methods, such as interviews or surveys, might constrain the depth of understanding regarding the contextual intricacies surrounding gender equality in education.

Another limitation lies in the potential bias present in the selected documents, as governmental perspectives or specific organizational agendas may influence them. This could impact the objectivity of the analysis and may not fully represent the diverse range of voices and experiences within the Azerbaijani society.

Finally, while the study recognizes challenges such as the underrepresentation of Azerbaijani women in decision-making roles and persisting gender disparities, it does not delve extensively into the root causes or potential interventions for these issues. Future research endeavours should consider employing more nuanced and context-specific methodologies to address these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding gender equality in Azerbaijani education.

Notes

1. Researchers collected data in [Table 1](#) from different publicly available OECD reports.
2. [Figure 1](#) was obtained in the publicly available annual report by the State Examination Centre of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2023.
3. [Figure 2](#) was obtained in the publicly available annual report by the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2023.
4. [Figure 3](#) was obtained from the Global Gender Gap Report, 2023.

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