

Feminism in Republic of Azerbaijan in Globalized World

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Abstract: Azerbaijan displays an interesting paradox of social advancement and women's movement in the process of Democratization and Marketization. Azerbaijani women in spite of enjoying better status and position compared to other developing Muslim Countries, have low levels of income in economic activity and high level of burden sharing in Marketization process. In such a setting, this study aims to take a fresh look at the current situation of gender equality in post- soviet Azerbaijan. Especial attention paid to the impact of globalization on feminism in Azerbaijan. This is particularly important to identify, how the interplay of regional and global factors influence gender related activities in developing countries like Azerbaijan. This paper shows that global feminism has led to advancement of marginalized women to become more conscious of their own issues and factors creating gender inequality in the different sectors of society in Azerbaijan. This paper starts with Introduction to depth analyses of women's movement in Azerbaijan influenced by Global and Regional feminism discourses, a brief review of feminism, in democratic nations in addition to obstacles for feminism in Azerbaijan, potential religious implications and the importance of Awareness in promotion of feminism leading to conclusion.

Key words: Global Feminism • Gender Equality • Marginalization • Awareness • Marketization
• Democratization

INTRODUCTION

Global feminism has the potential to be a powerful contributor to gender equality and creator of new opportunities for women to become more organized and demanding. However, these positive effects are still only potential and need to be unleashed. Therefore, there is much controversy surrounding the actual impact of global women's movement, particularly in terms of gender equity. In this new century, the facts of feminism have dominated every aspect of our consciousness. However we treat it, feminism remains to be an unresolved issue of century yet to be tackled seriously in most part of the world, particularly in undemocratically ruled nations and the global and local interplay of these facts continuously transforming the way we evaluate our views and believes on position of women in Society.

Theoretical studies on feminism based on principles of equal rights. The theoretical perceptions of women's position in Azerbaijan do not share the same principals with western concept of it, therefore there are clear distinctions between these two definitions leading us to

conceptualize and treat them differently. Woman's Rights bounded by ether Religious Ideologies (mostly in Muslim countries) or Nationalism (in many of disintegrated states of old Soviet Union) in culturally and ethnically diverse nations. If the feminism extremely influenced religiously, the evaluation of Azerbaijani women's position in Islam becomes an inevitable part of feminism discourse. For example, the theocratic regime of Iran's view on women and its gender policy has been part of feminism discussions in Azerbaijan for last two decades. In compressing to western influence on Azerbaijani women's movements, Iran as nation of common religion and historical experiences with Azerbaijan has been successful on integrating some of religious values to women's life in Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan.

As the world is virtually shrinking, the societies are becoming increasingly interdependent leading to wonder whether feminism, in states composed of diverse cultures, traditions and religion can manage to exist within such a globalized world while women's demand for equality and justice is growing. This continues global pressure over male dominated patriarchal society provided an

unprecedented opportunity for women to become aware of their own issues. This very important fact leads to numerous productive debates about feministic movement at different level. Whether feminism, is intellectually treated or ideologically approached, it will sink in minds and hearts of each individual woman who has been influence by new characteristic of information technology.

Feminism in Undemocratic Countries of Global World

Azerbaijan: As human beings, we have choices to make. These choices can bring glorious and prosperous, despite its probable unpleasant consequences. These choices are about differences in life, the differences between men and women whether they are perceived equal and their basic rights are given equal consideration. The prosperity and success of individual's future is clearly depended on what we do with these differences. Women of contemporary societies are conscious of their own issues and able to make these choices and despite of enormous difficulties they have been making progress in struggle for equal rights.

As our globalized world continue to grow smaller, the technological advancements expose us to other cultures, which provide opportunities to learn the particular social practices, or even prejudices of these other cultures. The comparative study of other culture includes ideological perception of women in different political systems, which is significant to secular feminism. This pepper will deal primarily with Feminism in Azerbaijan and will skip describing position of women in Islam. Since Azerbaijan is a secular country and religious values have not been fully integrated with states socio-political affairs, therefore, the study of women position in Islam is not critical to feminism discourses in Azerbaijan as it is to other Islamic nations. However, religion is one the defining factor in identifying the characteristics of power relation between women and men in this country.

Clearly, in democratically ruled societies unlike undemocratic nations, women's struggle for equal rights and their feministic movements institutionalized. The easy access to global networking system enables them to facilitate the transformation of their ideas cross the nations. The advancement of information technology is already benefiting women of democratic nations, which made them to be far ahead in feminist discourses. Women of Undemocratic nations, more specifically Muslim world marginalized and kept isolated throughout century. The patriarchal nature of these societies normally constitutes the characteristic of the mainstream. The idea of male superiority and women's dependency to them has been

consistent with traditional perspective of women position in these societies. Putting in perspective above facts, female society must understand that their existence do not need to depend on generosity of mainstream they are not part of it, there for, they will have to engage in activities to create a social space merely enough to reduce the dominance of female. Clearly, this is beneficial not only to women but also to traditionally marginalized groups too.

This argument of feminism here based on empirical studies of the Republic of Azerbaijan for last two decades. A comprehensive preview of post-Soviet era in Azerbaijan reveals the interplay between local and global factors in shaping the course of women's movements in Azerbaijan and the impact of globalization on feminism in this society. Global feminism comprised of feminist discourses, the international women's movement and transnational feminist networks have been very effective on development of women's movement in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan as a secular country in Muslim world is located in volatile Caspian region sharing border with Islamic Iran. Despite having, common religion "predominantly shies "being adjacent to ethnically - linguistically common provinces of South Azerbaijan in Iran, they are very different from each other in important ways such as theoretical perspectives on women's rights. The Islamic Republic of Iran continuously avoids Western influences while the secular Republic of Azerbaijan headed willingly to global integration and close ties with the West. In spite of Azerbaijan's attempt to avoid Islamic Ideologies destabilizing the foundation of its Secularism Political System, they have not been able to escape Iran's influences and Islamic propagandas. This ideological confrontation is more evident in feminism movement, because the Azerbaijani Women has shown special interest to Islamic Feminism, which provided a window of unprecedented opportunity for advocates of Islamic doctrines to have their views included in Azeri's Feministic movements.

The feminism discussions in Iran primarily focuses on women's position in Islam and to the gender policy of the Islamic Republic which might also include how feminism have been shaped by the interplay between local and global factors. In the case of the Republic of Azerbaijan , the Socio-Political and Socio-Economical conditions of post-Soviet era has been detrimental factors of women's social status and their living conditions, all of which, set base for feminism, as Nayere Tohidi explains "even the discourse of equal rights, that was initially avoided in Azerbaijan."

Based on a study by Nayere Tohidi, since its independence in 1991, people of Azerbaijan particularly women have faced new challenges, such as transition to capitalism, democratization and civil society building. Additionally during this transitional period, they have been struggling with complications of internal ethnic conflict and bloody war with Armenians over territorial disputes, which resulted in displacement of many whose lingering troubles are still hanging on shoulders of government's officials waiting to be resolved.

"The post- communist "transition" has included the replacement of Soviet egalitarian discourse and equal rights for women (at least at a formal level) with varying degrees of Western liberalism, conservative nationalism and Islamism, all of which have significant gender implications" [1].

Nayere Tohidi argues that, In Azerbaijan, women's rights or feminist discourse was seen as Western, which traditionally perceived anti-family for many old fashioned individuals who believed that, the new trend of feminism could be harmful to Azerbaijani culture. In this country, however, the new revelation in feminism and women's responses to these discoveries has led to a growing gender consciousness and women's awareness of their basic rights. Additionally it encouraged women's activism and demands for egalitarian changes and feminist values. Gender debate and intellectuals protests against political dominance of elites have become a critical component of the growing pro-democracy and consequently spread of women's movement in Azerbaijan.

The newly independent republics of Azerbaijan, as Nayere tohidi explains, emphasize the women's traditional role in society and places women's political and civic activism within the limits of male-dominated nationalist parties and centering it exclusively on nationalist causes. This pattern has begun to be questioned by some women due to the interplay between the national and international factors. "Nationally, women face post-Soviet conservative and regressive challenges to women's civil as well as social rights" [2] 'Nayere Tohidi' and internationally they face inevitable influences of global feminism. As of today many Social Scientist and Political Analysts argue that, there have been many positive sides to global feminism in undemocratic nations. It is evidently effecting women's general perception on feminism more positively leading to transformation of feminism traditional forms and conditions to relatively modest nature, capable of being responsive to the new challenges facing global feminism.

The positive impact of globalization on gender issue in Azerbaijan includes, first, the stimulating and facilitating role that the international human rights or women's rights organizations and global feminism have been playing in feminism discourse, such as transforming women's activism from initial nationalism in Azerbaijan toward increasingly feminist and democratic orientations. Second, most women intellectuals, political activists and feminists in Azerbaijan have shown more interest about the discourses, struggles and achievements of their non-Muslim activists in the West and in the developing world. This new trend of feminism in Azerbaijan led to encouragement of distinguished intellectual women from different class to get involved with feminist activities.

The highly educated Azerbaijani women that connected to state organs are actively participated in international seminars on different issue to establish international connections for strengthening their gender image. In the process of their contacts with the international community, especially with women's organizations and feminist discourses, they became more open-minded, pragmatic and more conscious of women's rights. During the 1990s in Azerbaijan, women's local activism not only connected increasingly to transnational and global factors, they also experienced a shift toward de-idealization, de-radicalization and pragmatism. This new trend of feminism poorly supported by predominantly, influential conservative male politicians.

Some conservative Politian argued that, how we will protect our young and naive women who take part in these conferences, from the bad influence of the West. They reemphasis the issue by questioning the rise of the divorce rate resulted by the impact of Western feminism, which terrify the authorities troubled with pragmatic and secular feminism. According to them, those influenced by the "Western model of woman" cannot appreciate our family values and our women's primary identities as mothers and wives. However According to Nayere Tohidi, "Women's social activism, initially dominated by charity and promotion of nationalism, is gradually gaining gender-consciousness. Azerbaijani women currently avoid identifying themselves with feminism, especially "Western feminism" which is associated in their minds with hostility to men and the family [3].

However there is positive side to these global integration, such as increasing numbers of well defined Non- Governmental Organizations including establishment of more women NGO's. Since the large number of the state controlled, women organizations in

Azerbaijan are headed by female relatives of the ruling elites, the impact of international seminars and intense activities of the women NGO's are the best way to reduce the power of state sponsored women groups composed of exclusively from the upper class women in Azerbaijan.

According to an Article by Nayere Tohidi "Currently, women's NGOs are of various types. Although these NGOs usually claim political independence, a number of them are directly or indirectly active in partisan politics as well as women's rights issues. For instance, the Azerbaijan Women's Majlis (Sevil) claims to be the largest women's association, with chapters or representatives in 72 regions of Azerbaijan and is led by the President's daughter Sevil Aliyeva. The D. Alieva Society for the Protection of Women's Rights initially emerged as the women's wing of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan and up to 1995 engaged actively in nationalist politics with no clear gender perspective. However, as stated by its Chair, Navella Jafarova, in recent years, this organization has become "more inclusive, less militant and more concerned with and active on women's and gender issues" [4].

Since 1991, there has been an ongoing effort on the part of Azerbaijani feminists to prove that women's quest for equality and freedom is not just Western. Their rightful demands are defined by state's gender policy, which has never been fully implemented. Additionally, attempts have also been made to prove that women's movement in Azerbaijan is closely connected to regional feminism discourses. Despite the fact that, women's movement in this region is prone to restrictive governmental gender policies, feminism has been responding to regional influence of gender discourses positively. At the local level, there has been evidence of religious factors influencing Azerbaijani women's movement. A good example of such case is the impact of Islamic feminism "Shi'a viewpoint; "promoted by Iranian government in Azerbaijan, such as, Advocacies and attempts to formally restore the sharia in family law. Few religious authorities and even some women have suggested, legalizing practice of temporary marriage as a solution to the current imbalance in sex ratios.

Azeri women are deeply connected to Iranian women religiously and to some extent traditionally, for most part, they respect women of Islamic Iran for their modesty in terms of religious behavior. Currently the number of Azerbaijani women's practicing Hجاب "woman wearing a headscarf" is growing while traveling to Iran more often as Pilgrims. The following passage is clear examples of how Azerbaijani feminism interacting with Political Islam in late 1999.

1-"In late 1999, following an intense campaign and petitions, Azerbaijani Islamic women activists won a court case in support of their demand for the right to choose a hair-covered picture for a woman's passport. Previously, the authorities in Azerbaijan refused to issue a passport with a picture of a woman wearing a headscarf. There were, however, local reasons in addition to the international influence of political Islam behind this pro-headscarf trend. Many of the Azeri Shiite women who have begun to wear the headscarf have been able to travel to Iran for a pilgrimage to Mashhad or have made a pilgrimage to Mecca (in Saudi Arabia). One resolution they make during such pilgrimages is to wear modest dress for the rest of their lives. These pilgrimages earn women the honorific rifles of Mashhadi khanim or Hajjiyeh khanim; wearing a headscarf would signify the right to such rifles, which are also indicative of class status" [5].

Obstacles for Feminism in Azerbaijan: Fortunately, Azerbaijan is a secular country and has egalitarian legal system. The main obstacle to implementation of a proper gender policy in Azerbaijan is not the legal system. There are combinations of many factors account for ineffectiveness of gender policies in Azerbaijan. First, Azerbaijan is heavily dependent on oil-based economic system; which limits the growth of its non-petroleum production industries, leading them to suffer from poverty, unemployment, the commercialization of sex and the trafficking of women and narcotics. As Nayere Tohidi argues "these trends, which are associated with Westernization and sexual "freedom," have provoked defensive and reactionary attitudes--reinforced by religious and conservative nationalists--that emphasize male control over women's bodies and their sexuality, reproductive capacity and public role [6].

Second, there is still exist, this notion of male supremacy within an authoritarian and corrupt polity in Azerbaijan, neglecting women's rights, the trend, which according to Nayere tohidi is more, pronounced and promoted by religious and conservative nationalist.

Women's Awareness: To encounter inevitable challenges facing women's struggle for equal rights necessitated women to be aware of traditional norms, customs and any things that marginalizing female societies. In the case of Azerbaijan, the empowerment plan will probably focus on religious factors that unconsciously influence women's desire to practice religious customs, which make most of political leaders in nationalist parties to adopt more

restrictive gender policies. However, women will have to be informed of their rights and challenges facing them. they have to understand that every individual is entitled for certain rights and these rights will not be handed to them easily. Women will have to get involved with programs designed to empower them politically and socially, enabling them to take responsibility of leading their own feministic movements. It is unlikely to presume that men will abandon their current superior position and willingly surrender to women's demand for equal rights, there for awareness is critical to feminism movement, considering the magnitude of their challenges, particularly in patriarchal societies.

"Women of Azerbaijan has long a long history of struggle for equality and emancipation dating back to the years before the Bolshevik take over....., Following this tradition, Azerbaijani women have been playing an active and responsible role in the transitional period. However, the emergency of war-stricken situation and concerns over primary needs and daily survival have preoccupied Azeri women leaving little energy and enthusiasm for Gender-specific issues. The low level of social awareness and understanding of how to protect democratic Wright women, the lack of political sophistication and lack of organizational skills, wide extend of conformism and limited individual initiative have slowed down the process of formation and maturation of a genuine women's movement [7].

To change the current notion of feminism movement and increase women's capacity to acquire more responsibility, activist must design and promote comprehensive programs and plans to empower female society and increase their political and social awareness.

Unlike undemocratically ruled nations, in democratic societies, Women's Rights activities institutionalized and feminism organizations fully protected by laws. However, whether, such legal protection is part of post-Soviet processes of democratization in the newly independent Muslim republics of Azerbaijan remains for many speculations, in a society, which is dominated by the capitalization process than democratization. Activist of women's movement fully understand the significant role NGOs on public awareness.

Activities of organizations such Women NGOs have not been easy. However, putting in perspective the importance of "Awareness" in empowerment of individuals and organizing groups to combat violation of Women's Rights, the quest for legal protection of organizations that are actively involved with women's improvement plans is extremely critical to their gender-

related challenges. Although, Azerbaijani government's unwillingness to allow the establishment of such organizations is evident, despite establishment of State Committee on Women, the activities of highly educated individuals in Women's movements is difficult.

"The State Committee on Women, created in 1998, is supposed to "oversee and coordinate" all programs and activities, including those of the women's NGOs dealing with women's status in Azerbaijan. The extent of this oversight is not clear yet, nor is its relationship with women's NGOs. The independence of NGOs from state control, however, is necessary for the emergence of civil society" [8].

According Law, NGO's or any other Non-Governmental Organization must obtain their license form ministry of Interior. Their applications usually would be rejected without legal bases, or their request will be processed slowly intentionally, to discourage the Applicants on their attempts for establishing such organizations. Government will try to reduce international pressure by labeling the applicant anti-government organization destabilizing the regime's political existence. Therefore, feminism in Azerbaijan is not only prone to consequences of conventional challenges but also it faces nationalistic and to some extends ideological interpretation of women's traditional position in Islam.

The transparency of these facts to female society is extremely important in Azerbaijan, However, the empowerment of women remain mutually important as individual's willingness increases on accepting such risky responsibility in extremely suppressed societies to make women understand that they have rights and they must demand for it. Empowerment of deprived females from their legitimate rights is not an easy task, however, considering its significance to overall objective of feminism in Azerbaijan, its seriousness became necessary to female activists. Feminism movement have encountered enormous difficulties and their activities obstructed through denying them access to free Media net work and banning newspapers and any publication that supports their views, there for It became increasingly risky and dangerous to stand against government with the question of Women Rights.

CONCLUSION

Even though equal rights for men and women are guaranteed under Azeri laws, gender inequality persists. In 1998, the Government established a state committee on women's issues to protect women's rights and to enact

measures to empower them. The National Plan of Action on Women's Policy, which was drafted by this Committee and approved by the Cabinet of Ministries in March 2000, sets out priorities for achieving gender equality. It is not as strong as it could be because there are no clear mechanisms for monitoring implementation.

According to a report by Nayereh Tohidi "Azerbaijan has joined the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and has officially adhered to several UN conventions concerning human rights and women's rights. The success or sincerity of Azerbaijan's authorities in the implementation of these conventions, however, remains to be seen" [8].

The experience of post-Soviet nationalist, conservative and Islamist forces collectively effecting women movement led them to redefine their gender parameters. This was in part a strategic response to inevitable impact of the transitional period on women's status. Many women, especially those with higher education, professional experience, are taking part in civil society building and democratization. They are fighting unemployment, political exclusion and social marginalization by participating in different sectors of Social activities, which is a considerable progress in women's social participation.

The worldwide ideological clash among and between nations of the world on different interpretation of Women's Rights and the discussion of these differences as part of empowerment plan has been making Azerbaijani officials very uncomfortable and it has been the most vivid controversial dispute of government agencies opposing the democratic notion of feminism. There for, these confrontation and diversities on issue of women's rights might have temporarily adverse consequences but it is beneficiary to long-term objectives of feminism, particularly in terms of feminism awareness. The ongoing feminism discourses broadly led to strengthening of feminism movement and gradual improvement of women's Socio-political statuses. These achievements are clear sign of how awareness can positively change the course of feminism direction and advance its overall objectives.

Calls for changes and endorsement of universal values of human rights and democracy by true believers in Azerbaijan, including intellectuals and various Women's Groups became the new challenges of feministic movements today. Feminist Activists managed to involve mostly impoverished middle class, the women and the youth whose voices had remained unheard for last few decades in Azerbaijani politics, did necessitate an effective reformist response to huge concerns regarding

women rights violations. As women's rights and movements expand their activities beyond its present liberal parameters, it becomes increasingly clear that, as long as pluralism remains a driving force in Azerbaijani politics, the women's movement will continue to achieve political and socio-economical results.

"The main challenge today for the women of Azerbaijan, is how to integrate the recent reintroduction of Islam; the state-provided protective measures and provisions like public child care centers, with the new marketization and democratization" [8].

Related Articles Studies for this Essay: Guardians of the Nation: Women, Islam and the Soviet Modernization in Azerbaijan." Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity. Eds. Herbert Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

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Nayereh Tohidi is Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at California State University, Northridge. She has written extensively on women and gender, democratization, modernization and Islamism (fundamentalism) in the greater Middle East, especially Iran and post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Her recent publications include Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity (1998).

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