

From Maktab to Modern Classrooms: Gender Dynamics and the Evolution of Teacher Education in Azerbaijan

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Abstract.

This article traces the historical evolution of education in Azerbaijan, focusing on the central role women have played in shaping the teaching profession from the early Islamic maktab system to contemporary post-Soviet reforms. Through a detailed historical lens, it examines how political, cultural, and economic forces – from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union and independent Azerbaijan – have influenced the feminization of teaching. The paper further explores the theoretical foundations and practical challenges of implementing gender-sensitive pedagogy in Azerbaijani teacher education. Drawing on feminist educational theory and regional data, the study reveals significant gaps in curriculum, institutional support, and societal readiness for transformative gender reform. Finally, the article proposes a strategic framework for embedding gender awareness into teacher training, emphasizing curriculum reform, faculty development, and community engagement as key levers of change.

The conclusion notes that in Azerbaijan, efforts to embed gender awareness into teacher training are still in their early stages. To address disparities, gender-sensitive teacher education is not merely an academic aspiration but a pressing societal necessity. Advancing gender equality in education requires more than isolated initiatives. It demands a coordinated approach grounded in international best practices and adapted to local realities. Policy commitment, institutional transformation, and ongoing cultural dialogue are essential for building an education system that not only reflects but actively shapes a more equitable future.

Keywords: education, teaching, maktab, women in teaching, feminization in education, pedagogy

Від мектабів до сучасних класів: гендерна динаміка та еволюція педагогічної освіти в Азербайджані

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Анотація.

У цій статті простежується історична еволюція освіти в Азербайджані, зосереджуючись на центральній ролі, яку жінки відігравали у формуванні професії вчителя від ранньої ісламської системи мектаб до сучасних пострадянських реформ. Через детальну історичну призму досліджується, як політичні, культурні та економічні сили – від Російської імперії до Радянського Союзу та незалежного Азербайджану – вплинули на фемінізацію викладання. У статті також досліджуються теоретичні засади та практичні проблеми впровадження гендерно-чутливої педагогіки в азербайджанську педагогічну освіту. Спираючись на феміністичну освітню теорію та регіональні дані, дослідження виявляє значні прогалини в навчальних програмах, інституційній підтримці та готовності суспільства до трансформаційних гендерних реформ. Пропонується стратегічна основа для впровадження гендерної обізнаності в підготовку вчителів, наголошуючи на реформуванні навчальних програм, розвитку викладачів та залученні громади як ключових важелів змін.

У висновку наголошується, що в Азербайджані зусилля щодо впровадження гендерної обізнаності в підготовку вчителів все ще перебувають на ранніх стадіях. Щоб подолати нерівність, гендерно-чутлива освіта вчителів є не просто академічним прагненням, а нагальною суспільною необхідністю. Просування гендерної рівності в освіті вимагає не лише окремих ініціатив. Вона вимагає скоординованого підходу, що ґрунтується на найкращих міжнародних практиках та адаптується до місцевих реалій. Політичні зобов'язання, інституційна трансформація та постійний культурний діалог мають важливе значення для побудови системи освіти, яка не лише відображає, але й активно формує більш справедливе майбутнє.

Ключові слова: освіта, викладання, мектаб, жінки в викладанні, фемінізація в освіті, педагогіка

Introduction.

Education in Azerbaijan has been shaped by a complex interplay of religious, imperial, ideological, and national forces across centuries. From Quranic instruction in mosque-based maktabas to the centralized Soviet schooling system and contemporary globalized reforms, each era brought new structures, priorities, and social expectations. One of the most enduring outcomes of these transformations has been the gradual rise – and eventual dominance – of women in the teaching profession. What began as a pragmatic response to labor shortages and state policy under Soviet rule has evolved into a persistent gender imbalance that continues to define the sector today.

Yet this predominance of women in teaching, while often cited as evidence of gender inclusion, masks deeper systemic issues. Male underrepresentation in schools and female underrepresentation in STEM fields reflect entrenched cultural norms and structural barriers that remain largely unaddressed. (George, 2024) Against this backdrop, the need for gender-sensitive teacher education becomes not only an academic imperative but a societal necessity.

This paper explores the historical roots and current dynamics of female representation in Azerbaijani education, with a particular focus on how gender has been integrated – or neglected – within teacher education frameworks. By linking feminist theory to local context, it offers a critical assessment of Azerbaijan's progress and proposes actionable strategies for advancing gender equity in the classroom and beyond.

The Evolution of Education and Female Teachers in Azerbaijan.

Education in Azerbaijan has undergone profound transformations over the centuries, shaped by religious traditions, imperial influence, Soviet ideology, and post-independence reforms. One of the most notable trends in this evolution has been the rising prominence of women in the teaching profession – a journey rooted in historical necessity, policy, and cultural shifts.

Before the 19th century, education in Azerbaijan was deeply intertwined with Islam. Primary schooling took place in maktabas, typically located within mosques. These institutions focused on basic literacy, Quranic studies, and arithmetic, primarily for boys. More advanced education was offered at madrasah, such as those established under the Shirvanshah dynasty in cities like Baku and Shamakhi, where students delved into theology, philosophy, astronomy, and medicine.

Access to education for girls during this period was minimal. While boys attended maktabas or madrasah, girls – especially from elite families – were sometimes taught at home through private tutors. Formal schooling for girls, however, was nearly nonexistent.

Russian Empire Influence (19th Century – 1917).

Russian imperial rule in the early 19th century brought significant changes. Secular schools began to appear in

the 1820s and 1830s, such as the Baku Realni School (founded in 1832) (Rice, & Kelsey, 2018). Education became bilingual, conducted in both Azerbaijani (Turkic) and Russian, though Russian increasingly dominated, especially in administration and elite circles.

By the late 19th century, a few female teachers emerged, mostly from privileged families. Institutions like St. Nina's School for Girls in Baku 1864 played a pioneering role in female education, setting the stage for broader changes in the 20th century. (Bayram Oglu, & Bayramov Hasan. 2021)

The Soviet Era (1920–1991): Literacy, Reform, and the Rise of Female Educators.

The Soviet period was a transformative era for education in Azerbaijan. Following the country's incorporation into the USSR in 1920, the Soviet government implemented sweeping reforms that reshaped the educational landscape and laid the foundation for mass literacy, gender inclusivity, and the rise of women in the teaching profession.

Soviet Educational Reforms.

One of the earliest and most significant initiatives introduced by the Soviet state was the *likbez* (short for *likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti*, or “liquidation of illiteracy”) campaign. (Voynarovskaya, & Voynarovsky, 2015) Aimed at eradicating illiteracy across the Soviet republics, these campaigns mobilized vast resources to teach reading and writing to the rural and urban populations alike. In Azerbaijan, where literacy rates were estimated to be as low as 10% in the early 1920s – especially among women – the impact was profound. By the 1940s, literacy had increased dramatically, surpassing 80%, and continued to rise in the decades that followed.

Alongside literacy campaigns, the Soviet state introduced a standardized, secular education system that was free and compulsory. Education became a central tool of socialist nation-building, with an emphasis on ideological instruction, technical knowledge, and civic duty. Coeducation was mandated, allowing boys and girls to attend school together – an approach that directly challenged long-standing patriarchal norms, especially in rural and traditional communities. For many Azerbaijani girls, this marked the first opportunity to receive formal education, laying the groundwork for increased female participation in both education and the workforce.

To support this rapid expansion of education, a new generation of trained teachers was urgently needed. In response, the Soviet government established teacher training institutions across the republics. In Azerbaijan, one of the most prominent was the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical Institute (now the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University), founded in 1921. This institution became a major hub for preparing qualified teachers, particularly women, for the nation's schools.

The Rise of Female Educators.

The inclusion of women in the teaching profession was not merely a response to workforce demands; it was

also ideologically driven. The Soviet regime promoted gender equality as a core principle, and encouraging women to take up roles in education, medicine, and administration served both practical and political goals. Teaching, in particular, was seen as a profession aligned with socialist ideals of collective responsibility and social development. Women were viewed as natural nurturers, well-suited to shaping the “new Soviet citizen” through early education.

Furthermore, teaching offered women upward mobility, state benefits, and social prestige. The profession was accessible and compatible with family life, making it an attractive option for women seeking both employment and social respectability. As more girls completed their schooling, many went on to attend pedagogical institutes, leading to a steady rise in the number of female educators.

By the mid-20th century, women had become the majority in Azerbaijan’s teaching profession – a trend that would continue into the post-Soviet era. This shift was one of the most enduring legacies of Soviet educational policy in the region.

Pioneering Azerbaijani Female Educators.

The story of education in Azerbaijan is incomplete without honoring the contributions of women who defied societal norms and laid the foundation for gender-inclusive schooling. In eras when girls’ education was either discouraged or severely restricted, a handful of visionary women stepped forward – not only as educators, but as social reformers, cultural negotiators, and agents of change. Their efforts did not merely provide academic instruction; they symbolized a broader resistance to patriarchal structures and paved the way for future generations of female teachers and learners. These early pioneers strategically navigated conservative expectations, often using culturally accepted practices like embroidery or religious instruction as a gateway to introduce literacy and numeracy. Their courage and creativity remain instructive for today’s debates on gender-sensitive pedagogy.

1. Hamida Javanshir (1873–1955).

A formidable figure in early Azerbaijani feminism and education, Hamida Javanshir was among the first to challenge the exclusion of girls from formal schooling. In 1901, she established the first secular school for girls in the Karabakh region – an extraordinary move at a time when female education was often equated with moral decline. Recognizing the cultural sensitivities of her community, Javanshir carefully designed the curriculum to balance tradition and progress. It included instruction in Azeri literacy, arithmetic, and embroidery – a culturally acceptable subject that served as a bridge between conservative families and progressive learning goals.

Her school not only provided girls with the tools of intellectual empowerment but also challenged deeply embedded patriarchal norms. In many ways, Hamida Javanshir’s work prefigured modern approaches to

gender-sensitive education by embedding equity goals within familiar cultural frameworks.

2. Sara Khatun (1894–1981).

Sara Khatun, another trailblazer in Azerbaijan’s educational history, began her teaching career in the 1920s – a period marked by both Soviet reform and lingering resistance to women’s public roles. Much like Javanshir, Khatun employed culturally strategic teaching methods to overcome community resistance. She famously incorporated embroidery into her lessons, using it as a “Trojan horse” to introduce girls to basic literacy and arithmetic. In doing so, she transformed traditional domestic arts into a subversive medium for empowerment.

Her pedagogical approach echoes what Paulo Freire (2010) would later define as critical pedagogy – the idea that education should be a tool for liberation, helping learners understand and challenge systems of oppression. Khatun’s classrooms were not just places of learning but microcosms of resistance.

Beyond her teaching, Sara Khatun broke new ground as one of the first Azerbaijani women to graduate from the Baku Pedagogical Institute in 1922. Over the next five decades, she trained more than 1,200 teachers, shaping generations of educators and consolidating the presence of women in a profession that had long been male dominated. Despite this progress, the fear of social backlash continues to haunt discussions around gender equality in schools – a reminder of how far the country has come, and how far it still needs to go.

Why Women Came to Dominate Teaching?

By the mid-20th century, the teaching profession in Azerbaijan had become heavily feminized, a trend deeply rooted in the social, economic, and political transformations of the time. Several interconnected factors contributed to this significant shift in gender representation within the education sector.

One of the most immediate catalysts was the impact of World War II. The war resulted in a dramatic labor shortage, as countless men were either killed in combat or redirected into heavy industry and military service. With many traditional male roles left vacant, women were encouraged – and often required – to step into the workforce to sustain the economy and public services. Teaching, being one of the more accessible and socially acceptable professions for women, became a natural point of entry.

Additionally, Soviet gender policies played a major role in shaping workforce participation. While officially committed to gender equality, the Soviet state reinforced traditional gender roles by channeling women into professions considered “nurturing” or “maternal” in nature. Teaching, alongside nursing and childcare, was heavily promoted as a suitable career for Soviet women. The state established teacher training institutes specifically aimed at female students, offered scholarships, and created pathways to employment that

aligned with the state's broader vision of women as both workers and caretakers of the next generation.

Beyond ideology and policy, teaching offered several practical advantages for women. It was considered a stable and respectable profession, carrying social prestige within communities. The job also provided a structured schedule, including summers off and relatively shorter workdays, which allowed women to better manage household responsibilities and childcare. This flexibility made teaching especially appealing to married women and mothers, for whom balancing work and family was a constant concern.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the feminization of teaching had become deeply entrenched in Azerbaijan. More than 70% of educators were women, with the highest concentrations found at the primary and preschool levels. These decades solidified a gendered pattern in education that would persist well into the post-Soviet period. Teaching came to be seen not only as a practical career option for women but also as a cultural norm, reinforcing long-standing associations between femininity and caregiving roles.

The legacy of this feminization continues today, as women remain the overwhelming majority in teaching across all levels of the Azerbaijani education system – shaped by historical necessity, ideological direction, and the enduring demands of work-life balance.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan (1991–Present): Reform and Continuity.

Modernizing the Education System.

After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan faced the challenge of redefining and modernizing its national identity, including a major overhaul of its education system. The country initiated wide-ranging reforms aimed at shifting away from the centralized, uniform Soviet model and toward a more autonomous, culturally relevant, and globally competitive education framework.

One of the earliest and most symbolic changes was the introduction of Azerbaijani as the primary language of instruction, replacing Russian in most public institutions. This linguistic shift was part of a broader effort to promote national identity, cultural heritage, and local values through education. Alongside this, there was a gradual adoption of Western-style grading systems and assessment methods, moving away from rigid Soviet-style evaluations toward a more student-centered approach.

In the early 2000s, Azerbaijan experienced notable growth in private education, including the establishment of private schools, colleges, and universities. These institutions offered alternative curricula, sometimes with international affiliations, and provided greater educational choice for families. The diversification of the educational landscape allowed for more innovation in teaching methods, curriculum development, and language instruction, especially in English and other foreign languages.

The rise of private institutions also created new professional opportunities for educators. Teachers were now able to pursue careers in both public and private sectors, often benefiting from improved working conditions, higher salaries, and professional development programs offered by private schools. This period also witnessed increased collaboration with international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO, which supported reforms in teacher training, curriculum design, and education management.

Despite these reforms, continuity with Soviet traditions remains visible in some areas, including centralized examinations, a strong emphasis on academic achievement, and a hierarchical administrative structure. Balancing these inherited systems with new pedagogical approaches continues to be a challenge in modern Azerbaijan.

Overall, the post-Soviet era in Azerbaijan has been marked by a dynamic mix of reform and continuity, as the country continues to navigate the complex task of building an education system that meets both national aspirations and international standards.

Women in Teaching Today.

In contemporary education systems across the globe, women continue to represent the majority of professionals in the teaching workforce. According to data from UNESCO, women account for approximately 75–80% of educators in many countries. This longstanding trend is influenced by a combination of cultural, economic, and social factors that continue to shape the gender dynamics within the profession.

One key reason for this dominance is the persistence of traditional cultural perceptions that associate teaching with nurturing and caregiving – traits that are often stereotypically linked to women. As a result, teaching is frequently regarded as a “feminine” profession, especially in early childhood and primary education, where emotional support and interpersonal skills are highly emphasized.

Economic considerations also play a significant role. Teaching remains one of the lower-paid professional careers in many regions, particularly when compared to fields like business, engineering, or technology. This salary disparity often deters men, who may be influenced by societal expectations to pursue higher-earning occupations in order to be perceived as financially successful or as primary family breadwinners.

Furthermore, the structure of the teaching profession is often viewed as more compatible with family life. Teaching typically offers more predictable hours, longer vacation periods, and opportunities for part-time or flexible work arrangements. These features are particularly attractive to women, especially those who juggle work with caregiving responsibilities at home. As a result, teaching is often chosen as a career that supports a better work-life balance.

While women have made significant strides in

educational leadership and policy roles, the teaching profession still reflects deeply embedded gender norms. Understanding and addressing these patterns is crucial for achieving greater gender balance and equity in education.

Theoretical Foundations of Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy.

Gender-sensitive pedagogy is rooted in critical and feminist educational theories that advocate for transformative learning experiences. bell hooks (1994) emphasize the need for education to be a “practice of freedom,” where classrooms become sites for challenging oppression and reimagining identity. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1970) advocates for a dialogical approach that encourages critical consciousness (*conscientização*), enabling learners to perceive and challenge social injustices, including gender inequality. Sandra Harding (1986) contributes through the concept of “standpoint epistemology,” arguing that marginalized perspectives – such as women’s experiences – offer essential insights into knowledge production and curriculum development. In teacher education, this translates into valuing diverse gendered experiences and critically evaluating dominant discourses. Raewyn Connell (2009) emphasizes the importance of “gender regimes” in education and introduces the idea of “gender justice,” suggesting that educational institutions must actively work to dismantle patriarchal systems. Joan Scott (1986) provides a historical lens, asserting that gender must be understood as a primary way of signifying power and social relations. Elza Mollayeva, an Azerbaijani scholar in education, reinforces these theories in the local context. She asserts that “gender awareness among teacher candidates is a precondition for transforming patriarchal attitudes and promoting democratic citizenship” (Mollayeva, 2018).

Gender Sensitivity in Azerbaijani Teacher Education Curricula.

Despite formal commitments to equity, gender-sensitive content in Azerbaijani teacher education programs remains superficial. Most curricula lack dedicated modules that address gender as a social construct or explore pedagogical approaches to equality. While governmental reforms have led to greater awareness, practical implementation lags behind. A 2021 review by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicated that fewer than 10% of education faculties in Azerbaijan include gender education as a standalone topic. Moreover, studies such as that by Aliyev and Hasanova (2020) point out that many university instructors lack familiarity with gender-inclusive teaching methods, resulting in the reproduction of gender stereotypes in classrooms.

Challenges in Implementing Gender-Sensitive Teacher Training.

The implementation of gender-sensitive pedagogy in Azerbaijan is impeded by several entrenched barriers.

Cultural Resistance: Traditional gender norms continue to influence educational spaces. As noted by Kandiyoti (1988), “patriarchal bargains” in post-Soviet

societies often lead individuals – especially women – to conform to conventional roles for social stability. This cultural climate makes gender discussions in teacher education controversial or overlooked.

Institutional Limitations: Many faculties lack instructors trained in feminist theory or gender pedagogy. According to Gultekin Taghiyeva (2019), the absence of institutional guidelines, learning materials, and gender-focused professional development leads to fragmented and ineffective interventions.

Policy-Practice Gap: While gender equality is referenced in the State Strategy for Education Development (2013–2025), mechanisms for policy enforcement are weak. There is no monitoring framework to evaluate gender sensitivity in teacher education programs.

Lack of Resources: Gender-sensitive textbooks and visual materials are either outdated or unavailable. Few publications reflect the diversity of gender roles or counter stereotypical representations, further entrenching biased perspectives.

Strategic Pathways for Reform.

In recent years, Azerbaijan has taken steps to raise awareness of gender sensitivity in education through public forums and conferences. Notably, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with international organizations such as UNICEF and UN Women has hosted annual conferences focused on gender equality in education. For instance, the 2022 “Gender and Education Forum” held in Baku emphasized mainstreaming gender perspectives in teacher training institutions and featured workshops on inclusive curriculum design. These events have been instrumental in facilitating dialogue among policymakers, educators, and civil society, and in generating recommendations for integrating gender topics more consistently across higher education programs.

To ensure meaningful change, Azerbaijan must adopt a comprehensive and multi-level strategy that embeds gender sensitivity into all aspects of teacher education:

Curriculum Reform: Introduce mandatory modules on gender theory, equity in education, and inclusive teaching practices. These should be evidence-based and reflect global best practices.

Faculty Development: Universities should provide regular training and incentives for instructors to integrate gender-sensitive pedagogy. Partnering with international institutions can offer models for capacity building. (T. T. L. Saha et al. 2024)

Material Innovation: Revise textbooks and digital resources to include diverse gender representations, moving beyond binary and stereotypical portrayals. Promote participatory resource development that involves students and educators.

Critical Reflection: Encourage pre-service teachers to examine their own biases and assumptions. Facilitate classroom discussions, reflective journals, and fieldwork on gender-related challenges in real teaching contexts.

Stakeholder Collaboration: Work with NGOs, education ministries, and donor agencies to fund long-term programs that integrate gender sensitivity into educational institutions. Public campaigns can also raise awareness and counter cultural resistance.

Embedding Gender Awareness in Education.

For education systems to become truly equitable, gender awareness must be deeply embedded within the teaching and learning process. This begins with the adoption of gender-sensitive pedagogy – an approach that encourages educators to use inclusive language, provide balanced representation in examples and case studies, and foster equitable classroom participation. Teaching materials should portray both women and men in diverse roles, deliberately avoiding the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes.

In Azerbaijan, scholars have made significant contributions to advancing gender sensitivity in education. For example, Gulnara Mamedova, a leading figure in gender policy and education, has extensively examined how gender considerations can be integrated into educational reform. Her work highlights the systemic changes needed to create inclusive teaching environments that support all learners. Similarly, Farida Asadova, a researcher at the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, advocates for the incorporation of gender-focused approaches within teacher education curricula. She emphasizes the importance of equipping future educators with materials and training that raise awareness of gender-based issues and build the competencies needed to address them effectively in the classroom.

A crucial component of this transformation is the integration of mandatory gender-sensitivity modules in teacher training programs. (Md. Afroz Alam, 2025). These modules should not only introduce the theoretical underpinnings of gender equality but also offer practical, case-based exercises that encourage teachers-in-training to reflect on and overcome their own biases. For in-service teachers, continuous professional development through workshops, seminars, and peer collaboration is essential for sustaining inclusive practices.

Teachers also play a powerful symbolic role. A gender-balanced teaching workforce communicates to students that professional roles are not determined by gender. (Kevin F McGrath, 2022) Actively encouraging girls to pursue science, technology, and leadership roles – and boys to explore caregiving, education, or the arts

– helps challenge and dismantle long-standing gender norms.

Curriculum reform is another critical step. Teachers must be trained to critically evaluate textbooks and learning resources for gender bias. When biases are identified, they should be addressed through thoughtful modification or by supplementing with inclusive content. This creates a learning environment in which all students see themselves reflected and valued.

Moreover, promoting a truly inclusive classroom requires open communication and ongoing feedback. Teachers should cultivate a culture of mutual respect, using tools like anonymous surveys to monitor student experiences across gender lines. Involving students in gender-focused projects or extracurricular initiatives can also deepen their understanding of and commitment to equity.

Finally, the support and involvement of families and communities are vital. Schools can organize awareness sessions for parents, helping to reinforce gender-sensitive messages beyond the classroom. Partnerships between schools and local communities are often key to the long-term success of gender equality initiatives.

Conclusions.

Azerbaijan's teaching history reflects broader societal shifts – from religious schooling to Soviet mass education, and now a modernized system shaped by globalization and reform. Women became the majority in the teaching profession during the Soviet era, driven by labor shortages, state policies, and enduring cultural norms. Today, that trend continues, with women making up the vast majority of educators. However, this gender imbalance – particularly the underrepresentation of men in teaching and women in STEM – remains a persistent challenge.

To address these disparities, gender-sensitive teacher education is not merely an academic aspiration but a pressing societal necessity. In Azerbaijan, efforts to embed gender awareness into teacher training are still in their early stages. As outlined in this analysis, advancing gender equality in education requires more than isolated initiatives. It demands a coordinated approach grounded in international best practices and adapted to local realities. Policy commitment, institutional transformation, and ongoing cultural dialogue are essential for building an education system that not only reflects but actively shapes a more equitable future.

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