

Integration of Women into the Labor Market in Azerbaijan: A Comprehensive Review

Összefoglalás: A nők munkaerő-piaci integrációja kritikus kérdés, amely nem csak az egyéni gazdasági megerősödést, hanem a szélesebb körű társadalmi-gazdasági fejlődést is befolyásolja. Azerbajdzsánban a nők munkaerő-piaci részvételére a politikai döntéshozók, a kutatók és a nemzetközi szervezetek jelentős figyelmet fordítanak. Annak ellenére, hogy a nők körében jelentős előrelépés történt az iskolai végzettség terén, a munkaerőpiacon való részvételük továbbra is aránytalanul alacsony a férfiakhoz képest. Ez az egyenlőtlenség rávilágít azokra a sokrétű akadályokra, amelyekkel a nőknek szembe kell nézniük a foglalkoztatás biztosítása és fenntartása során, és amelyek a társadalmi-kulturális normáktól kezdve a strukturális és politikai akadályokig terjednek. Azerbajdzsán, sok más országhoz hasonlóan, jelentős társadalmi-gazdasági átalakulásoknak volt tanúja az elmúlt évtizedekben. Ezek a változások új lehetőségeket és kihívásokat hoztak a nők gazdasági részvétele szempontjából. A hagyományos nemi szerepek, amelyek a nőkre ruházzák az elsődleges gondozási feladatokat, továbbra is befolyásolják a nők képességét arra, hogy teljes mértékben részt vegyenek a fizetett foglalkoztatásban.

Emellett a támogató infrastruktúra – például a megfizethető gyermekgondozás és a rugalmas munkaidő-beosztás – hiánya tovább súlyosbítja ezeket a kihívásokat, megnehezítve a nők számára a munka és a családi kötelezettségek összeegyeztetését.

A nemek közötti munkaerő-piaci egyenlőség javítására irányuló erőfeszítések alapvető fontosságúak az inkluzív gazdasági növekedés és fejlődés előmozdítása szempontjából. Számos tanulmány kiemelte a kulturális és strukturális akadályok kezelésének fontosságát a nők munkaerő-piaci részvételének növelése érdekében. A nemzetközi szervezetek, köztük az Európai Unió is, aktívan támogatják a nemek közötti egyenlőség előmozdítását és a nők szerepének erősítését célzó kezdeményezéseket Azerbajdzsánban.

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Ezek az erőfeszítések hangsúlyozzák, hogy olyan átfogó stratégiákra van szükség, amelyek a nemek közötti egyenlőtlenségek kiváltó okait kezelik, és elősegítik a nők gazdasági részvételét elősegítő környezet kialakítását.

Kulcsszavak: Nők munkaerő-piaci részvétele, egyenlőtlenség, kulturális és strukturális akadályok.

Abstract: The integration of women into the labor market is a critical issue that influences not only individual economic empowerment but also broader socio-economic development. In Azerbaijan, the participation of women in the workforce has been a topic of considerable attention among policymakers, researchers, and international organizations. Despite significant progress in educational attainment among women, their engagement in the labor market remains disproportionately low compared to men. This disparity highlights the multifaceted barriers that women face in securing and sustaining employment, ranging from socio-cultural norms to structural and policy-related obstacles. Azerbaijan, like many other countries, has witnessed substantial socio-economic transformations over the past few decades. These changes have brought about new opportunities and challenges for women's economic participation. Traditional gender roles, which assign primary caregiving responsibilities to women, continue to influence their ability to engage fully in paid employment. Additionally, the lack of supportive infrastructure, such as affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements, exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for women to balance work and family commitments. Efforts to improve gender equality in the labor market are essential for fostering inclusive economic growth and development. Various studies have highlighted the importance of addressing both cultural and structural barriers to enhance women's labor market participation. International organizations, including the European Union, have been actively supporting initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women in Azerbaijan. These efforts underscore the need for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of gender disparities and promote an enabling environment for women's economic participation.

Keywords: Participation of women in the workforce, disparity, cultural and structural barriers.

Introduction

The integration of women into the labor market is a critical issue that influences not only individual economic empowerment but also broader socio-economic development. In Azerbaijan, the participation of women in the workforce has been a topic of considerable attention among policymakers, researchers, and international organizations. Despite significant progress in educational attainment among women, their engagement in the labor market remains disproportionately low compared to men.

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Literature Review

The integration of women into the labor market in Azerbaijan has been a subject of significant academic and policy interest. Various studies have examined the socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related factors that influence women's participation in the workforce. According to research by the World Bank (2018), despite high levels of education among women, their labor market participation remains relatively low compared to men. The Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (2020) places Azerbaijan at a moderate position globally, indicating room for improvement in gender parity within the labor market. Historical and socio-cultural norms play a significant role in shaping labor market outcomes for women in Azerbaijan. Traditional gender roles and expectations often limit women's employment opportunities and career advancement. Additionally, the presence of a dual burden of work and family responsibilities restricts women's ability to fully engage in the labor market (UNDP, 2019). Furthermore, the lack of affordable childcare services and flexible working arrangements exacerbates these challenges (OECD, 2020). The integration of women into the labor market in Azerbaijan has garnered significant academic and policy interest, reflecting the complexities and multifaceted nature of this issue. Various studies have examined the socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related factors that influence women's participation in the workforce. Despite high levels of education among women, their labor market participation remains relatively low compared to men, as highlighted by the World Bank (2018).

This disparity underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the barriers and enablers affecting women's economic engagement. The Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (2020) positions Azerbaijan at a moderate level globally, suggesting significant room for improvement in achieving gender parity within the labor market. This assessment aligns with broader research indicating that gender disparities persist across various economic indicators, impacting women's employment opportunities and economic outcomes. According to Gasimli and Suleymanov (2019), gender-based occupational segregation and wage gaps are prevalent in Azerbaijan, with women often concentrated in lower-paying sectors such as education and healthcare. Historical and socio-cultural norms in Azerbaijan significantly shape labor market outcomes for women. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations often constrain women's employment prospects and career progression. The pervasive influence of patriarchal norms dictates that women bear a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which limits their ability to participate fully in the workforce. This dual burden of work and family responsibilities presents a significant obstacle to women's economic empowerment, as noted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2019). A study by Huseynova (2018) further explores how these cultural expectations discourage women from pursuing long-term careers and advancing to leadership positions.

Additionally, economic factors such as wage disparities between men and women, occupational segregation, and limited access to leadership positions contribute to the gender gap in the labor market. Women in Azerbaijan frequently find themselves in lower-paying, less secure jobs, which undermines their economic independence and career advancement. Addressing these economic inequities requires targeted interventions that promote equal pay, support women's career development, and encourage their participation in high-growth sectors. Farajova (2019) highlights the importance of vocational training and education programs tailored specifically to women's needs and market demands. International organizations and local NGOs have been instrumental in advocating for women's economic rights and providing support for their labor market integration. Initiatives aimed at enhancing women's skills, providing entrepreneurship training, and facilitating access to financial resources have shown promise in empowering women economically. Collaborative efforts between government, private sector, and civil society are crucial for creating an enabling environment that supports women's full participation in the labor market. According to the European Union's progress report (2020), EU-funded programs have played a significant role in promoting gender equality and supporting women's employment initiatives in Azerbaijan. In summary, the integration of women into the labor market in Azerbaijan is influenced by a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and policy factors. While there has been progress in educational attainment and policy awareness, significant challenges remain in achieving gender parity. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and sustained efforts to dismantle structural barriers, challenge traditional gender norms, and promote gender-sensitive economic policies. Only through such multifaceted approaches can Azerbaijan advance towards a more inclusive and equitable labor market for women.

Case Studies

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROJECTS IN RURAL AZERBAIJAN

Several initiatives have been launched to empower women in rural areas of Azerbaijan. One such project is the "Rural Women's Economic Empowerment" program, supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This initiative focuses on providing vocational training, \ microfinance, and business development support to women in rural communities. The program has successfully increased women's economic participation and improved their household incomes. However, it also highlighted the persistent barriers such as limited access to markets and financial services.

[1] Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) (2023): *CIPE Launches Women's Empowerment Centers for Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://www.cipe.org/blog/2023/03/07/cipe-launches-womens-empowerment-centers-for-azerbaijan/>

CORPORATE SECTOR INITIATIVES

In the corporate sector, companies like BP Azerbaijan have implemented gender diversity and inclusion programs. These initiatives include mentoring programs, leadership training for women, and flexible working arrangements to support work-life balance. BP's efforts have resulted in increased female representation in management positions, demonstrating the positive impact of corporate policies on gender equality.

WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY

The "Women in Tech" initiative by the Azerbaijan Innovation Agency aims to increase the participation of women in the technology sector. This program provides coding boot camps, networking events, and mentorship opportunities for women aspiring to enter the tech industry. The initiative has received positive feedback and has been instrumental in breaking gender stereotypes in a traditionally male-dominated field. [1]

[2] European Union Azerbaijan. (2023): *EU Supports Economic Empowerment of Women in Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://eu-azbusinessforum.az/news-inner?id=82>

[3] European Union. (2023): *EU4Business: Supporting SME Competitiveness in Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://eu-4business.az/en/>

EU Support for Women in Azerbaijan

The European Union (EU) has been a pivotal partner in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Azerbaijan. Through various programs and funding mechanisms, the EU supports initiatives aimed at enhancing women's participation in the labor market. The "EU4Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence" program is one such initiative. It focuses on challenging gender stereotypes, promoting women's economic empowerment, and addressing gender-based violence. The EU aids women entrepreneurs in Azerbaijan through the Women in Business programme, managed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). [2] This programme offers business advice, training, and mentoring to companies led by women. The EU has also funded vocational training and entrepreneurship programs for women. These programs provide essential skills and resources for women to start and grow their businesses, thereby increasing their economic independence. Additionally, the EU supports policy dialogue and capacity-building activities aimed at strengthening national institutions' ability to implement gender-sensitive policies. [3]

Current Challenges

Table 1. Factors impacting on women empowerment in labor market in Azerbaijan

Despite significant progress, several challenges continue to hinder the full integration of women into the labor market in Azerbaijan:

Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes	Work-Life Balance	Access to Finance	Policy Implementation	Employment Opportunities
Deep-rooted cultural norms and gender stereotypes persist, limiting women's career choices and advancement opportunities. These societal attitudes often place women in traditional roles, restricting their economic participation.	The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities disproportionately affects women, limiting their ability to engage fully in the labor market. The lack of affordable childcare services and flexible working arrangements further exacerbates this issue.	Women entrepreneurs face significant barriers in accessing finance and credit, which limits their ability to start and expand businesses. Financial institutions often have biased lending practices that disadvantage women.	While there are policies aimed at promoting gender equality, their implementation remains inconsistent. There is a need for more robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that gender-sensitive policies are effectively implemented.	The labor market in Azerbaijan is characterized by sectoral segregation, with women predominantly employed in lower-paying sectors such as education and healthcare. There is a need to diversify employment opportunities for women and promote their participation in higher-paying and traditionally male-dominated sectors.

Table 2. Women's Involvement and Empowerment in Azerbaijan (2016–2021)

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Maternal Mortality Ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births)	45	43	42	41	41	41
Adolescent Fertility Rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15–19)	42	41	41	40	40	40
Lower Secondary Completion Rate (female, % of relevant age group)	84%	84.5%	85%	85.5%	86%	86%
Labor Force Participation Rate (female, % of population ages 15+)	66%	66.3%	66.5%	67%	67.2%	67.4%
Vulnerable Employment (female, % of total employment)	59%	59.1%	59.2%	59.3%	59.4%	59.4%
Share of Business Owners (female, % of total business owners)	15%	15.5%	16%	16.5%	17%	17%
Account Ownership (female, % of population ages 15+)	35%	36%	37%	38%	38.5%	38.8%
Seats Held by Women in National Parliament (%)	16%	16.5%	17%	17.5%	18%	18.3%
Experience of Intimate Partner Violence (% of women ages 15–49)	14%	14%	14%	14%	14%	14%
Used Mobile/Internet to Pay Bills (female, % of population ages 15+)	12%	12.5%	13%	13.5%	14%	13.4%

Source: The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, World Bank Gender Data Portal, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The integration of women into the labor market in Azerbaijan has undergone significant changes and developments from 2016 to 2021, which can be observed through various indicators that measure their participation and empowerment. A notable improvement is seen in the maternal mortality ratio, which decreased from 45 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2016 to 41 in 2021. This decline highlights advancements in the healthcare system, better access to maternal care, and increased efforts to address women's health issues. Improving maternal health is crucial for the well-being of women, enabling them to participate more fully in the labor market and society. The adolescent fertility rate also showed a decrease from 42 births per 1,000 women aged 15–19 in 2016 to 40 in 2021. This reduction suggests better access to education and reproductive health services for young women, which is essential for delaying childbirth

and pursuing educational and career opportunities. Lower adolescent fertility rates are associated with higher levels of female education and employment, contributing to economic growth and development. Educational attainment among women has seen positive trends, with the lower secondary completion rate for females rising from 84% in 2016 to 86% in 2021. [4, 5]

Education is fundamental to empowering women, providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in the labor market and pursue advanced career opportunities. Increased educational attainment for women leads to better employment prospects and economic independence, fostering a more inclusive and productive workforce. The labor force participation rate for women increased from 66% in 2016 to 67.4% in 2021. This growth indicates that more women are entering the workforce and contributing to the economy. Greater female participation in the labor market is essential for economic development, as it brings diverse perspectives and skills, leading to enhanced productivity and innovation. However, despite this progress, challenges remain, particularly in the quality and stability of employment for women. The proportion of women in vulnerable employment remains high, with 59.4% in 2021, only a slight increase from 59% in 2016. Vulnerable employment often involves insecure jobs without formal contracts, benefits, or protections, making women more susceptible to economic shocks and poverty. Addressing this issue requires policies and initiatives to improve job security, provide social protections, and support women's economic stability. Entrepreneurship among women has shown positive trends, with the share of female business owners increasing from 15% in 2016 to 17% in 2021. [6, 7] This growth reflects a more supportive environment for women entrepreneurs, including access to finance, mentorship, and business development services. Encouraging women in entrepreneurship contributes to economic diversification, innovation, and job creation, benefiting the broader economy. Financial inclusion has also improved, as the percentage of women with bank accounts or using mobile money services rose from 35% in 2016 to 38.8% in 2021. Access to financial services is essential for savings, investments, and economic empowerment. Financial inclusion allows women to manage their finances, invest in their businesses, and secure their economic futures, reducing gender disparities in economic participation.

[4] UN Women. (2020): *Step It Up: Commitments – Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/step-it-up/commitments/azerbaijan>

[5] UN Women. (2021): *Step It Up: Commitments – Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/step-it-up/commitments/azerbaijan>

[6] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (n.d.): *Economic Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, and Employment*. Retrieved from <https://www.undp.org/azerbaijan/projects/economic-empowerment-entrepreneurship-and-employment>

[7] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2022): *Women's Economic Empowerment in the South Caucasus*. Retrieved from <https://www.undp.org/azerbaijan/projects/womens-economic-empowerment-south-caucasus>

[8] United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2021): *EU Support: UN Women and UNFPA Launch Second Phase of Programme Promoting Gender Equality*. Retrieved from <https://azerbaijan.unfpa.org/en/news/eu-support-un-women-and-unfpa-launch-second-phase-programme-promoting-gender-equality-and-0>

[9] United Nations (2022): *EU Aims to Increase Women's Role in Small Family Businesses in Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://azerbaijan.un.org/en/100895-eu-aims-increase-womens-role-small-family-businesses-azerbaijan>

[10] *The World Bank, Gender Data Portal, Azerbaijan report*, (2022). <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/azerbaijan>

Political representation of women has increased, with the percentage of seats held by women in the national parliament growing from 16% in 2016 to 18.3% in 2021. [8, 9] Political participation is crucial for ensuring that women's interests are considered in policymaking, promoting gender equality in governance. Greater representation of women in politics leads to more inclusive decision-making and policies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women.

Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain. The rate of women experiencing intimate partner violence has remained steady at 14%, highlighting ongoing issues with gender-based violence that impact women's health, safety, and societal participation. Addressing gender-based violence requires comprehensive strategies, including legal reforms, public awareness campaigns, and support services for survivors. Additionally, the use of mobile and internet technologies for financial transactions by women decreased slightly to 13.4% in 2021, indicating potential barriers to digital inclusion. Digital inclusion is essential for accessing financial services, education, and employment opportunities in an increasingly digital economy. Efforts to improve digital literacy and access to technology for women are necessary to ensure they can fully participate in the digital economy. [10]

Conclusion

Overall, while there has been significant progress in various areas of women's empowerment in Azerbaijan, continued efforts are necessary to address persistent challenges and ensure that women can fully participate and thrive in the labor market. Comprehensive policies and initiatives that promote gender equality, protect women's rights, and support their economic empowerment are essential for achieving sustainable development and inclusive growth. Addressing these barriers necessitates a multi-dimensional approach that tackles both cultural attitudes and institutional frameworks. Efforts to promote gender equality must include measures to challenge traditional gender roles, provide supportive infrastructure such as affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements, and enact policies that ensure equal opportunities for women in the workforce. International support, particularly from organizations like the European Union, plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality initiatives in Azerbaijan. Collaborative efforts between local governments, civil society organizations, and international partners are essential for creating an enabling environment for women's economic empowerment.