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CHANGES IN THE GENDER RELATIONS AFTER THE FALL OF  
THE SOVIET UNION: THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN.

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## Abstract

Nowadays, the immense amount of discussions exists regarding the gender roles and social inequalities between men and women in the world. The concept of gender equality can be distinguished differently when it comes to the country's political and economic issues, and aspects such as culture, traditions, history and mentality, that play a crucial role in the creation of the society. Being one of the post-Soviet states, Azerbaijan has been chosen as a country where gender issues were examined due to the fact that, Azerbaijan is a unique case for studying the interplay of religion, state socialism, ethnicity, culture, traditions in affecting the gender relations within the Azerbaijani society. Thus, the research has been conducted in order to see the changes and the reasons that triggered the changes in gender relations within the Azerbaijani society that happened during and after the fall of the Soviet Union and up until today. A field work has been done in order to investigate this topic, where semi-structured interviews had been used while interviewing Azerbaijani people, both male and female. While presenting field narratives, the changes and reasons for the changes are demonstrated that further are analyzed by using different theories and analytical framework provided by other authors. Thus, analytical discussion provides the answers to the research questions and suggests the future challenge for Azerbaijan society in eradication process of gender misbalances, as well as tests the stated hypothesis.

**Keywords:** *post-Soviet states, Azerbaijan, gender relations and changes, religion, mentality.*

## **I Literature review and Background to research area:**

“The Republic of Azerbaijan is an independent secular state in the Southern Caucasus, situated between Europe and Asia at the crossroads of the East-West trading routes; where just as in the distant past geopolitical interests, economic competition, and cultural contacts are bound tightly together” (UNDP Azerbaijan, 2007:12). Even though Azerbaijan is a secular country, one can see gender differences in all aspects of economic, political and social life of Azerbaijan people. By looking back to the history of the country, one can see that before the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1920s, the great gender misbalances between Azerbaijani men and women existed and started to gradually decrease under the socialist rule, as a result of providing equal rights to all citizens within the 15 states (Peshkova, 2013).

The intention of the research is to look at gender relations in Azerbaijan and thus it is better to define gender, prior to the literature background and research analysis. Gender has various definitions, however, this research will use the term “gender” as a system that defines “being man” and “being women” within the society in relation to the segregation of responsibilities and the attribution of rights and duties (Mason, 1995; Pinnelli, 1997).

### *Azerbaijan under the Soviet rule (cultural, social, economic and political aspects):*

The majority of people living on Azerbaijan territories (approximately nine million) are Muslims, where they have divided themselves into two religious groups, which are Shia and Sunni (Motika, 2001). During the 70 years of socialist rule under the Soviet Union, religious practices were restricted and the lack of religion has affected the loss of religiousness within the immense amount of population in the country. Even though the practice of religion was prohibited under the Soviet rule, there were a number of children that have been taught by their parents and grandparents, who exercised Islamic manners and practiced their religious obligations. Thus, many people in their middle age today still remember their grandmothers wearing headscarves (kalaghe), praying every day (namaz) and fasting (Heyat, 2008). The influence of the lack of religion has eroded into religious norms in Azerbaijan and can still be observed nowadays, such as the dietary prohibitions and gender relations. However, even though during and after the Soviet rule the immense amount of population didn't pray and fast, nevertheless there were still basic beliefs in God and the fear of Allah with some religious practices such as visiting the shrines (ziyarat) and paying alms (nazir) (Najafizadeh, 2013).

At the same time, the Communist regime brought a mass employment, obligatory education (primary and secondary) and equal rights for both men and women (Heyat, 2008). Moreover, during the Soviet regime patriarchal stereotypes and traditional mindsets diminished which was followed by the eradication of the women's illiteracy and participation in public life and industrial production. It is important to mention that despite these facts, women's participation in the political life was not as equal as it might be seen from the outside. Providing women with high but not decisive statuses within the political party and governmental administration, in reality it was the illusion of the equal participation in political sphere (Tohidi, 1997). It has been stated that from fifteen female members only one at a time was a part of the Politbure (Political Bureau) of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR (The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). In the case of Azerbaijan, due to the family traditions women at most of the times had to be part of the working class as well as doing their housework such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children (UNDP, 2007: 16).

Furthermore, it can be observed that during the Soviet Union the ethnic belonging and ethnic pride informed the identity for Azerbaijani community and mostly for women, where strong disapproval of smoking, driving a car, wearing trousers and marrying non-Muslim men have been reinforced. Being Azerbaijani for women was to respect gender and generational deference, to act with modesty, and the most important within the Azerbaijan society, sexual honor (namus) (Heyat, 2006).

#### *Post – Soviet Azerbaijan (cultural, social, economic and political aspects):*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the position of women in the Azerbaijan society has been influenced by the three main factors: Western ideology, Islamist ideal for women and destabilization of social and political forces that appeared after the adoption of independence (Najafizadeh 2013). Trade activities have been seen as a main source of income since 1991, instead of employment in industry and agriculture because after the collapse of Soviet Union demand for industrial and agricultural commodities had declined. There was a dramatic increase in the predominance of Azerbaijani women in the public activity, such as shop assistant, hairdressers or waitress in comparison with the 1990s, where Azerbaijani women were not allowed to serve male public and service center. The departure of other ethnic groups such as Russians, Georgians and Turkmens can be seen as an essential reason for more active role of local Azerbaijani women in the public activity. These changes in the labor market affected the women's way of dress and manner,

where the skin tight jeans and trousers, and even ultra-short skirts were evoking reactions from Azerbaijani men (Heyat, 2006).

Since 1991, feminist NGOs in Azerbaijan had tried to improve the women's position in society in order to achieve gender equality. As a result one can see the creation of gender policy, which in fact has not been fully implemented. Later in the 1998, in the already independent Azerbaijan the government established the State Committee on Women's Issues which created the National Plan of Action on Women's Policy and has been approved in March 2000 by the Cabinet of Ministries of Azerbaijan Republic. The main aim of the Committee was to empower women by protecting women's rights and achieving gender equality and is one of the most significant documents in the field of gender policy in the country (MFA, 2013). In February 6, 2006 Ilham Aliyev, current president of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed a decree on the institutions of the State Committee on the Problem of Family, Women and Children (Heydar Aliyev's heritage research center, 2010:139 - 140).

However, even though today in Azerbaijan there are a great number of NGOs working with women's right and gender equality, gender policies that have been established in Azerbaijan are still ineffective due to the various reasons. For instance, the dependence on the oil-based economies is automatically leading to the decrease in the other non-petroleum production that effect the creation of poverty, unemployment and we can observe that prostitution rates have been increased within the country over the course of the post-Soviet independence. Therefore, aforementioned challenges for further development of the country, take most of the governmental time and the state is not able to focus more on the effectiveness of gender policies within the country. Second reason, as it was already mentioned above, is the notion of male supremacy that influences the women's rights and has been promoted by the religious and conservative nationalist view (Najafizadeh, 2003).

Thus, it can be argued that although Azerbaijan is a secular country that is not fully integrating religion into the state's socio-political affairs, religion has been seen as a pivotal part of the process of identifying the characteristics of power relation between sexes in Azerbaijan (Osuli, 2011).

## **II Aims, structure and research questions:**

From the aforementioned information it can be seen that nowadays gender issues are at least on the agenda in the Azerbaijan society. Officially gender plays an essential role in the development process of the country by influencing economic, political, educational, religious, family and other

segments of the society. Due to the fact that the process of raising awareness regarding gender issues is a new phenomenon, there is only limited amount of research made in relation to this topic. The research highlights gender issues in the former Soviet Union and post- Soviet era, in order to investigate the changes in gender relations and reasons for these changes between Azerbaijani men and women. To scrutinize this topic a field study has been done in Azerbaijan, where one month has been spent conducting interviews with Azerbaijani community.

While conducting interviews the main aim of the research was to examine the opinions of people from different generations about the gender issues in Azerbaijan during and after the Soviet rule until the present days. One has to keep in mind that, even though 25 interviews has been conducted, only few of them will be presented because informants frequently provided analogous information. Thus, the most beneficial interviews and stories of the informants have been chosen for the research in order to make the field narratives engaging to read.

## 2.1 Structure of the thesis

The further section of research includes information regarding the data collection, theoretical approach, ethical considerations and motivation of the current research. After introducing the research aims and methods, limitations will be illustrated to highlight the weaknesses and strengths of the research. Theoretical framework alongside with the analysis section are pivotal parts of the research where the latter combine three parts that are field narratives, a summary of the findings and analysis of theories and findings. The field narratives will provide the description of the research process and present the different quotes of women/men's thoughts regarding the gender issues within the Azerbaijani society. Later the field narratives will be summarized and illustrated in a summary of the findings section in order to make it easier for readers to follow the research when it comes to the analytical discussion, as well as presenting the answers to the stated research questions. Different authors' ideas and theories, presented in theoretical framework section, will be used in analytical discussion to support the findings. After presenting the results, the future challenge for Azerbaijan society considering the gender inequalities will be presented, as well as stated hypothesis will be tested.

Thus in this context the hypothesis is: *After the fall of the Soviet Union both positive and negative changes in gender relations can be seen in social and economic spheres and the reasons for that might be the rise of religious concepts and prejudice within the Azerbaijan society.*

Considering the aforementioned hypothesis the title of the research is: *Changes in the gender relations after the fall of the Soviet Union: the case study of Azerbaijan.* Thus the research



questions are: 1) *Were there any positive or negative changes in the gender relation in Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union?* 2) *What were the most prominent reasons for these changes between sexes within the Azerbaijan society during the post-Soviet period?*

### III Methods

The study is based on a qualitative method, where one month had been spent conducting semi-structured interviews with Azerbaijani people and literature review had been used. An interview process itself is one of the pivotal data collection tools within the qualitative research that provide the researcher with a better understanding of people's perceptions, explanations of various situations and construction of reality (Punch, 2005:168).

#### 3.1 Data collection

The interviews were conducted in Russian and Azerbaijani languages, which later have been translated into English and transcribed for a further use in the analytical part of the research. Interviews had different locations such as coffee shops, shopping malls, parks, schools and interviewer's home. The main reason for choosing this kind of places for conducting interviews was due to the great number of available informants and their function as public spaces where informants could feel more comfortable while answering the delicate questions related to gender issues.

##### *Sampling:*

Snowball sampling was used throughout the interview process, where interviewees suggested new informants relevant for my research (Bryman, 2012:424). Twenty five interviews were conducted which consisted of five focus group interviews and twenty face-to-face or phone interviews. Two of the groups focused on women who lived during the Soviet period, while two other focus groups concentrated on females that were born during or after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted with women between 19-65 years old and men 20-65 years old. It is important to mention that, all of the informants were educated and were either studying at university level or working. Therefore they had some knowledge considering historical and religious aspects, and few of the interviewees had background knowledge regarding gender issues.

*Secondary Sources:*

Furthermore, various documents such as books and academic literature has been used as secondary sources of data in order to find more evidence regarding the history of the Soviet Union and Azerbaijan, as well as information concerning theories. Apart from academic journals and books, other sources of the secondary information were reports published by major non-governmental organizations such as UN (United Nations) and ILO (International Labor Organization), as well as governmental website with data regarding gender policies. According to Bryman (2012: 554) while using virtual documents (internet documents) one should be aware of authenticity (everyone can establish a website) and credibility (the distortion awareness). Sometimes, it is doubtful whether web pages are representative or not in relation to a specific topic and it is important to scrutinize if the information is biased by personal or subjective ideas (Bryman, 2012:554). Thus, interviews and various other documents presented above together assist the empirical material to understand and illustrate the gender roles between men and women within the Azerbaijan society and find an answer to the stated questions.

**3.2 Theoretical approach:**

Grounded theory has been seen as a most suitable approach for the thesis work. The concept was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s (Punch, 2005:156). In grounded theory approach research begins with raising generative questions that assist to guide the research. After the process of collecting data has started, the loose idea of core theoretical concepts is identified and thus linkages are developed between the theoretical concepts and the data. The next step is to verify and summarize the findings and to evolve the theoretical discussion (Bryman, 2012:387).

As it can be seen, this research uses qualitative research methods mainly because of the research topic and the questions that have been raised. Semi-structured interviews are trying to illustrate the whole spectrum of the women's life in Azerbaijan, their role in the society and gender issues, while literature review add background information about the history and gender issues of the country during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as information regarding the theories. The background information that demonstrated the changes in gender relations have been presented in order to illustrate the differences between the data provided by other authors' works and current research findings that are based on the interviews with Azerbaijani population.

### 3.3 Ethical considerations:

All of the informants asked for anonymity when it comes to the interview process, thus the names of the interviewees will be changed while adding different quotes from the interviews. The word interviewee will be used instead of real names and in order to distinguish them, numbers will be added alternately (interviewee 1, 2,3 etc.). Furthermore, each interview was preceded by a brief explanation of the research topic and permission from interviewee to use a tape recorder. Every interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Tape recorder has been seen as a significant tool when it comes to the qualitative research, where the main focus during the interviews is not only what people say, but also how they say it (Bryman, 2012:482), and therefore had been used in almost all of the interviews.

### 3.4 Motivation:

The personal motivation was to investigate the reasons for the changes that have not been emphasized by other researchers, which were investigating the case of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the findings can also assist in further development process of Azerbaijan society in improving gender misbalances between men and women.

## IV. Limitations:

There are certain limitations with the chosen method, which are mainly the challenges that arose during the interview process. Firstly, it was hard to reach majority of people due to the lack of interviewees' time or unwillingness to speak because the interview questions were sensitive to some interviewees. Secondly, in qualitative method the number of people and the size of focus groups can be seen as a challenge as well, when it comes to the time limitation and transcribing process. As Bryman states, it should be no more than ten people in the group and the number of these groups mainly depends on the quality of the interviews (Bryman, 2012:507). Thus, the number of people within my focus groups was from three to four people in each group. Furthermore, it is important to mention that immense amount of interviews can be waste of time, as well as it is hard to transcribe all of them on the later stage of the research (Bryman, 2012:505). When it comes to the number of interviews, time constraints have been seen as one of the main obstacles in conducting more interviews, both focus group and face to face interviews.

Apart from the limitations with the methodology, there are other limitations related to the current research. On one hand, being born and raised in Azerbaijan can be seen as a positive aspect for the research process, due to the fact that there is some kind of knowledge regarding the

Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani society nowadays. On the other hand, this can create various biases, such as, somehow influencing interviewees with the presented interview questions or affect the final results of my research with the personal understanding of the problem. Despite this fact, as an Azerbaijani female it was difficult to conduct interviewees with the men due to the prejudices in the country regarding this topic. Thus, the number of female interviewees exceeded the number of male interviewees which can also be seen as a limitation for the research but it was overcome by the quality of male informants.

The specific period which has been chosen as a main focus for the thesis covers former Soviet Union and post-Soviet time until the present days. This can be seen as another limitation for the thesis, because of the various significant events that had happened before the establishment of the Soviet Union that might also influence the current situation in Azerbaijan. However, due to the scope of time that is given for the current research and the broadness of the chosen topic it is impossible to cover a period before the socialistic rule.

The last but not the least, the issue of generalization might be considered as a limitation, where even though people from different parts of Azerbaijan participated in the interview process, they all lived in Baku (capital) at the moment and often they cannot present the views of other people living in the rural areas. It is important to mention that, even though the study is not representative, it gives in depth information that usually passes unnoticed in statistical inquiry.

## **V Theoretical framework**

Two theoretical perspectives will be used in dialogue with the current research findings. The first perspective comes from Bahramitash. R and Hooglund. E and illustrates the research made by the Rezai-Rashti, professor in University of Western Ontario, Canada regarding the influence of educational level on gender inequalities within Iranian and Muslim societies. The main statement is that equal distribution of higher education will transform the nature of gender regimes in Islamic countries (Bahramitash, 2011:55). The second perspective comes from Kuli-zade, which is focusing on the mentality issues that affect social inequalities within the Azerbaijan community. Kuli-zade highlights various aspects such as patriarchal ideals within Azerbaijan families and behavioral principles that have been seen as pivotal parts of the national mentality. However, the essential idea is the authors' argument that the analysis of gender relations has to be implemented with the assistance of mentality issues, rather than gender dependence on economic or religious aspects (Kuli-zade, 2003:255).

Moreover, the academic article “Theory of Migration” written by Everett S Lee will be used to provide a supporting theory for the findings regarding the relation between social inequalities and internal migration in Azerbaijan. The authors’ theory of migration is based on the “push” and “pull” factors that influence people’s decision to migrate. The latest has been explained as a positive aspect that pulls people to migrate to urban areas because of better employment opportunities or health care system. Meantime, he explained pushes as a negative aspect that influence people to migrate from rural areas as a result of weak education system alongside with high unemployment rates and etc. (Lee, 1966).

## VI Analysis

The analysis section is divided into several sub categories which includes field narratives, summary of findings and analytical discussion. Thus, in this section the research will provide the outcomes of interviews and discussion that will answer to the stated research question. In this section the field narratives will present already translated and transcribed interviews that will be used in the analytical discussion alongside with the theoretical framework.

### 6.1 Field Narratives

The research started by choosing different places in the capital city (Baku) to organize interviews, where questions from the question guide had been presented to each informant. The questionnaire can be found in the separate table below (see the Appendix 1).

Firstly, the shopping mall located in the city center had been chosen as a place to take interviews due to the immense amount of informants that can be found there. However, it was difficult to reach people due to the lack of time, unwillingness to speak, and misunderstandings of what was the aim while asking questions. Thus, after spending several hours trying to reach people, it was realized that shopping malls are not the best location for conducting interviews. The second location for conducting interviews was a place in front of the shopping mall with number of people. After introducing the research aim to an old woman that was sitting with the child and asking whether she had few minutes to answer my questions for the research that is related with the gender issues in Azerbaijan her first question was: “What is gender?” Thus after providing a brief explanation we proceeded to the interview. Throughout the whole interview, from the answers and emotions that informant showed while answering the questions it was evident that the topic of the research was sensitive for her. Later on, as she was providing me with an answer for the last question, the reasons for being so emotional came out. That was a real life story related with her

daughter and the mother of that child sitting next to her. Her main statement was that during the Soviet Union time there was equality in Azerbaijan and that everything has changed nowadays:

*“There was equality ... my mom was production manager in the construction business (she had 16-20 foremen). Nowadays, men are selling women’s underwear, and women are working as a broom. Due to the number of divorces today one can say that there is equality within the family, because in the past women could not even think about divorce. However, this is not a case in all families, for instance, my daughter got married and when she wanted to divorce, he killed her and went to jail... Now I am looking after their son. She just wanted to divorce, he thought “neither yours, not mine” and killed her, and here is your “equality” (Interviewee 1, 2014).*

After the last words I stopped to record the conversation, barely express my condolences and thanked her for her participation in my research. The emotions after the interview were so enormous that I have decided to give up with the idea to continue with the interview process. However, after a while it finally decided to try one more time and moved to the park that was nearby the shopping mall. I decided to interview a woman sitting a last bench in the park. After introduction and a brief explain of the research and its aim, we proceeded to the interview. Later, I found out that she is working with the gender issues in Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. The interview lasted for one hour where different aspects of Azerbaijan society were discussed, as well as informant’s thoughts/views regarding the gender issues in Azerbaijan were described following way:

*“It was independence, equality and everything was regulated and stabilized under the Soviet rule. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of men who lost their jobs exceeded the number of women that have been adapted faster to the new governmental system. In my opinion gender equality is utopia and woman always has to be woman” (i.e. women sticking to the traditional gender roles) (Interviewee 2, 2014).*

Later, interviewee 2 provided me with contacts of other gender specialists in Azerbaijan that were working in the National Academy of Science. I got her contact details if I needed to conduct interviews in the academy, which was beneficial for the research process. Thus, the next week at the Academy and three interviews were conducted: one focus group interview and two individual interviews. Due to the last working day before the traditional Azerbaijan holidays (“Novruz Bayram”) it was difficult to find more informants that were working with gender issues. However, the focus group interview with two Azerbaijani women working within the gender field introduced another picture of gender relations in Azerbaijan. One of them was born and raised in the rural area (Mingechevir), while another one was born and raised in the capital city (Baku). During the interview one can see the similarities between their views on specific occasions within the Azerbaijan community.

Regarding the Soviet Union time, both of them mentioned that the level of education for women has increased in comparison with the past where there was a high rate of gender discrimination. For the post - Soviet period they mentioned several changes that have been made in the Azerbaijan society such as women's activity in the public spheres and the number of conservative families that are decreasing nowadays. When it comes to their personal experiences one can see that for both women there are inequalities within the family, while at the work place they don't feel the discrimination with one exception:

*“Me personally, I don't feel inequality, maybe only when it comes to the selection of director, both sexes can apply; however it is always men who will be chosen at the end of the selection and women will not be even considered” (Interviewee 3, 2014).*

*“I am from the rural area (Mingechevir) and personally I haven't felt inequality either, at least not at work. When it comes to the family, I have to ask permission from my husband whether there is a business trip and the answer will depend on his mood, which can be seen as a discrimination in the spouses' relations” (Interviewee 4, 2014).*

Moreover, during the interview other different aspects of Azerbaijan society nowadays that has a negative effect on the gender equality between sexes were raised:

*“Nowadays, the number of Azeri women that are gaining more money than men do, are increasing dramatically. While, some of Azeri men are not even trying to get better and earn more because they are pleased with the situation where women took a role of a breadwinner and feed the whole family. Women are also pleased with this situation because they are convinced that while being a breadwinner in the family they have more rights and freedom of speech” (Interviewee 3, 2014).*

Further, face to face interviews were conducted with their college that was originally from the rural area (Djalilabad), but has been raised in the capital. She believed that one cannot say that there is social inequality or equality within Azerbaijan and that everything is relative and depends on the situation:

*“When it comes to the gender equality within the work place, it depends on the type of job, because there are some jobs for women and some for men. Women nowadays can earn money, have freedom of speech and appear on TV. It is democracy in Azerbaijan, but again not in all situations. The equality within the family is illusion and in my opinion it is important not to have one due to the fact that man has to always be a head of the family. However, he should not only concentrate on his work and spent some free time with his family/kids” (Interviewee 5, 2014).*

Moreover, the informant provided me with a generalized picture of men living in Azerbaijan:

*“Some of the Azeri men love to say “I am a man, I can do whatever I want to do”. Even at work they are trying to put themselves above women due to the fact that they are men. However, there are men in Azerbaijan with a broad world view and they are only for the fact that their wife is going to work because they understand that whether something will happen to them, their wives will be able to feed their kids” (Interviewee 5, 2014).*

Thus, interviewee 5 supported the ideas of her co-workers regarding the improvements in inequality when it comes to the distribution of high positions between men and women in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, from her words it can be seen that gender issues are developing in Azerbaijan and nowadays even women living in the rural areas have more rights than before, the exception are women that have been raised in conservative families.

The second focus group interview was conducted at home with three women from different parts of Azerbaijan and age groups (65, 45 and 35). The oldest one from the rural area of Xizi as other informants above, stated that there was equality during USSR and that there were good living conditions for everyone. However, the second woman from the capital (Baku) argued that during the Soviet Union it was another type of equality:

*“In the Soviet Azerbaijan it was rare that woman was a director and when she went home she still had to work in the house. It was another type of equality in USSR, where men still have been seen as a head of the family and women still had to be “homemakers”. However, one positive thing during the USSR was stability” (Interviewee 6, 2014).*

Meantime, the third informant illustrated a picture of the gender relations in the rural area where she came from (Nakhchivan); where in some families women didn't have a right even to leave the house during the Soviet Union.

When it comes to the post – Soviet Azerbaijan, the woman from Baku highlighted the fact that women's role within the Azerbaijan community is improving throughout the years and nowadays gender issues are on the agenda.

*“Women have more opportunities and they achieved a lot nowadays. They can be seen as a breadwinner that can feed the whole family and be a director of firms and fabrics. The last 3 years among my friends I have noticed matriarchate, where majority of women are working more than their husbands. These women are mostly 40-50 years old, while a new generation (25-30 years old) is more equal, where both men and women are trying to work. Thus, it is stabilizing now and maybe new generation will achieve gender equality. However, one should keep in mind that women have been always seen as a neck and men as a head, thus even though from the side it seems like men are deciding everything, in reality whenever neck will turn, the head will follow it” (Interviewee 6, 2014).*



After I have interviewed people that lived during the Soviet Union, new informants were interviewed that were either just born at that time, or were too small to remember something about the Soviet Union period. These interviews were conducted in order to demonstrate youth's knowledge regarding the gender relations during the Soviet Union and their understandings and views concerning the gender issues in Azerbaijan nowadays.

The first interview was made in a café with three young females that have been raised in Baku. None of them lived during the Soviet Union. However, from their answers it can be stated that there were social inequalities in the rural areas, when in Baku social equality had depended on the type of family where females had been raised:

*“During the Soviet Union there were both modern and conservative families, among the 100 percent of population, 20 percent had equality within both work place and family. Other 80 percent were conservative families that even didn't let their daughter to attend schools, communicate with some people, for them, girls should not work and their duties were only to look after kids, cook, clean, while men have been seen as a breadwinner and head of the family” (Interviewee 7, 2014).*

*“Nowadays, the number of the modern families has increased from 20 percent to 40 percent out of 100 percent. However, conservative families still exist that are seeing girls only as a future wives and mothers” (Interviewee 8, 2014).*

The issues regarding the conservative families have been raised above; however one of these females presented the origins of conservative families:

*“Usually these families (conservative) are coming to the capital from other rural areas where they think “why girls need education if she will get married and sit at home at the end of the day”. Thus, they start to influence other people from the capital and trying to push their opinions and for these girls which are raised in the modern families, nowadays it is easier to find a job” (Interviewee 9, 2014).*

Within the Azerbaijan community nowadays men are still putting boundaries for their girlfriends/wives such as prohibitions regarding the clothes, smoking, drinking and places where she can or cannot visit etc. This aspect was criticized by one of my informants:

*“Even though cigarettes have similar negative effect for both sexes in our society it is acceptable only for men to smoke while it has been seen as a prohibition for women. When it comes to the prohibitions regarding clothes, during the summer when females are wearing shorts or short dresses, they will receive a thousand of comments from the males that are passing by. The comments are not usually compliments and these men accuse those women saying that if woman is wearing these kind of clothes, she wants to seduce men. At the same*

*time, males also are not allowed to wear shorts and sometimes can be criticized by other conservative males if they do” (Interviewee 8, 2014).*

## New respondents

After the completion of field research it was realized that Azerbaijani men had to be interviewed, therefore it was decided to make a phone interview with different categories of men. The main goal is to present different points of view on gender issues within the Azerbaijani society provided by both sexes. Young informants have been divided into three categories: conservative/religious, modern with the broad world view and ones that are living/studying/working abroad. The contacts of my informants have been taken from relatives and friends in Azerbaijan.

Males that have been raised during the Soviet Union had the same ideas as the female informants above, stating that there were social equality and stability during the Soviet rule in comparison with the situation nowadays. However, some young male informants that have been either born during or after the collapse of the Soviet Union had different views on the gender relations in Azerbaijan.

*“We didn’t live in the USSR but I think it was illusion of equality. Men were dominant in all sectors and the last decision was always made by men” (Interviewee 10, 2014).*

The phone interview was made with two Azeri males that have been living abroad for five years. The interview demonstrated two different views regarding gender issues in Azerbaijan. One of the informants was born and raised in the rural area (Sumgait), while another was born in the capital (Baku). The part of their dialogue will be presented in order to see how differently people can think and understand one aspect of gender inequality:

- *“Nowadays there is inequality in Azerbaijan; women are working less than they did in USSR, they don’t work as a policemen or in the tram. Thus, they have fewer opportunities to work” (Interviewee 10, 2014).*
- *“It is wrong to take only these sectors, nowadays women have more opportunities to work in other sectors” (Interviewee 11, 2014).*
- *“Decision making increased, you are right, however still opportunities for women decreased” (Interviewee 10, 2014).*

As it can be seen, they were presenting their views on the opportunities that have been given for women nowadays in comparison with the past, further on the conversation changed into a discussion regarding the social equalities/inequalities within the Azerbaijan society:

- *There is equality due to the number of divorces and single mothers in Azerbaijan (Interviewee 11, 2014).*
- *There are inequalities according to the statistics that shows that salaries for men are way higher than women's salaries (Interviewee 10, 2014).*
- *When it comes to the families in the new generation they are keen to have equal rights within the family, while older generations do not. In the rural areas except of big cities no changes have been made in order to reduce gender inequalities (Interviewee 11, 2014).*

The second informant highlighted the fact that gender issues are developing nowadays and the number of modern families is increasing. However, when it comes to inequalities within the work place, there are still inequalities and one of the informants showed the possible reason for that:

*While taking to any kind of job they are looking at females' marital status and there is a possibility that they are not going to take you due to the fact that you are single and going to marry in the nearest future and thus will take a maternal leave (Interviewee 10, 2014).*

Another informant that relates to the religious/conservative category supported the ideas of the old generation about social equality; however interviewee 12 added a comment regarding the Soviet rule:

*"Relations between men and women were equal during the Soviet Union, but not ubiquitously. The main idea of USSR was an absolute equality not only gender, but also class equality. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union proved that absolutism in the world is not reachable" (Interviewee 12, 2014).*

Regarding the today's situation in Azerbaijan his conclusion was that even though nowadays women have more rights than in the past, social equality does not exist in Azerbaijan. This idea was supported by another informant that relates to the category of a male that have a broad view on the world. However, he introduced his ideas differently and illustrated the gender inequality issues in Azerbaijan from another angle:

*"I don't know a lot about USSR time due to the fact that I wasn't born that time however, I guess that whether that time there would be gender equality, nowadays there will be no problems with these issues or at least less problems" (Interviewee 13 2014).*

He illustrated the picture where men are playing a crucial role within the Azerbaijan society than women:

*"Even in the capital there are gender inequalities at work and in the families. Men have higher job positions than women, in the family men have a freedom of choice, and they are allowed to*

*do whatever they want. While women have been always judged more strictly by how they dress, talk and have rules of what they can or cannot do” (Interviewee 13, 2014).*

Furthermore, the informant mentioned that there are some improvements nowadays in Azerbaijan society towards the reduction of social inequalities:

*“New schools are building nowadays in the rural areas that can be seen as a first step in reducing the level of gender inequality in those areas by providing both males and females with an equal education” (Interviewee 13, 2014).*

### Reasons for changes in gender relations

Thus, from the data given above one can see that there have been a number of changes in the gender relations within the Azerbaijan society after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Informants presented both positive and negative changes and the reasons for these changes will be introduced further in this section. Before presenting reasons it is important to mention that the changes have been divided into four essential groups: 1. *Social Inequality*; 2. *Social equality other way around*; 3. *Social equality exists but not everywhere*; and 4. *Social equality* that will be presented below in the summary of findings section. A majority of the informants presented the reasons for gender inequalities that have been influenced by the fall of the Soviet Union, while the reasons for gender equality have been seen as a result of a modernization process.

One of the main reasons for gender inequality that was mentioned throughout the interview process is the lack of education. Education has a direct link with the gender equality and discrimination within the Azerbaijan society. One of the informants highlighted the fact that marriages are also dependent on the level of education that women have:

*“All together, it can be seen as a reason for changes (gender inequalities); however, whether women have a good education it is almost impossible for her to stay at home and not to work. Education level decreases a number of early marriages and the quality of education also significant when it comes to the decisions regarding marriages” (Interviewee 3, 2014).*

As it was mentioned above, opportunities for boys to get a higher education are higher when it comes to the rural areas for instance. Therefore, the majority of girls living in those areas are illiterate and have been seen only as a homemakers, while men have been always seen as a primary sources of income. When it comes to Baku, it depends on the type of family and its origins. If families are conservative and originally coming from the rural areas, their daughters will be still disadvantaged when it comes to higher education. This division of responsibilities is influenced by

historical and mental representations. Mentality itself has been seen as a second essential reason for social inequalities in the Azerbaijan community that almost all informants presented:

*“Within the families the reason for changes (gender inequalities) is our mentality, for us man is the head of the family. What other people will say? – is a common problem in Azerbaijan that has also direct link with the issues of mentality” (Interviewee 4, 2014).*

*“The reason for changes (gender inequalities) can be seen a mentality that has their roots in our veins from the time immemorial” (Interviewee 5, 2014).*

In Azerbaijan families, there is still a pressure on females to form the desired image of the family, lifestyle and everything is explained with life experience and maturity of their parents. Within the Azerbaijan culture, confrontation against parents has been seen as a punishment, great offence and thus children, especially females have to show the diligence and obedience. Thus, if females are trying to express their ideas, they are considered daring sometimes.

Furthermore, one of the male informants mentioned some other reasons for changes (social inequalities) that might be linked to the issue of mentality:

*“The reasons for changes (gender inequalities) are traditional foundations and segregation of duties where woman’s responsibility is to cook, clean and man’s responsibility is to earn money for his family, which in Europe has been seen as inequality. Azeri people saw this division of labor from our grandparents, fathers, thus it is in our blood and genes and can be seen as a hallmark of our society” (Interviewee 12, 2014).*

Meantime, he argued that mentality is not one of the major reasons for gender inequalities and provided me with comments regarding people’s position nowadays in the Azerbaijan society:

*“Even though majority of people in Azerbaijan, state that the reason for social inequalities is Azerbaijani mentality, everything is depending on the man’s character. However, in Azerbaijan if you are not rich or don’t have huge network behind your back, you are no one. We are frightened by the governmental power, and Azeri people have been called sleeping lions, everyone became the lions for the circus” (Interviewee 12, 2014).*

One can consider that under the Soviet rule this was not the case and there was class equality as it has been pointed out above by the same informant.

The issue of conservative families from rural areas migrating to the capital was seen as a third major reason for social inequalities in Azerbaijan:

*“The major reason for gender inequalities is a migration of people from rural areas to capital that brings their ideas, rules and trying to push them to other people living in Baku” (Interviewee 8, 2014).*

The prohibitions for both female and male have been mainly made by these people coming from rural areas. The issue of religion can be also highlighted while talking about prohibitions such as wearing provocative clothes, drinking, smoking and etc. As it has been stated in the background, even though Azerbaijan is a Muslim country, religion plays a pivotal role when it comes to gender roles between men and women.

Despite these three main and two minor reasons for inequalities the male informant that had been lived and studied abroad for five years proposed one reason for social inequalities that differ from those stated above:

*“The lack of paternal leave can be seen as one of the pivotal reasons for inequality in Azerbaijan society that has to be considered by the government when it comes to the decrease of the gender inequality rates” (Interviewee 10, 2014).*

Thus, six reasons have been raised throughout my interview process where three major reasons will be analyzed and discussed in accordance with the theoretical perspectives presented earlier.

## **6.2 Summary of findings**

This section will summarize the findings and outcome of the interviews in order to make it easier to follow and understand the analytical discussion which will be presented later on.

From the information given above one can claim that on one hand informants stated that in the Soviet Union there was equality, independence and stability in the capital (Baku); however, when it comes to the districts inequality was observed. Women in Baku had more rights, obligatory equal education and some of the women even worked as directors. On the other hand, some of the interviewers mentioned that during the Soviet rule the gender equality, even in the capital (Baku), was dependent on the family where you have been raised. During those times the whole population consisted of only 20 percent of modern families.

Moreover, one interviewee considered that there was equality in the Soviet Union but not ubiquitously and that absolutism, which was one of the essential aims of the Soviet Union in both gender and class equality, is not reachable and the collapse of the Soviet rule is a proof.

Despite this fact, some informants highlighted as well the fact that even though women were working the same amount of time as their husbands, responsibilities for cleaning and cooking were still on women's shoulders.

The rest of the informants stated that equality was an illusion and men always dominated in all sectors, thus they argued that gender inequalities didn't decrease in Azerbaijan even under the Soviet rule.

When it comes to the post-Soviet period various changes have been seen within the Azerbaijan society. These changes have been divided into four groups as it was already mentioned above and will be presented as a bullet points in accordance with the interview answers:

*1. Social inequality:*

- Nowadays, there is no gender equality in Azerbaijan; however, in comparison with the past women have more rights.
- In the districts, except bigger cities, there are still great gender misbalances between sexes.
- There is no gender equality nowadays, men do whatever they want and have higher job positions, while women have immense amount of restrictions.
- There is gender inequality now- women work less than before. Decision making increased, while opportunities to work decreased. For instance, women are not working anymore as policemen or a bus driver.

*2. Social equality other way around:*

- Men are selling underwear; women are working as a broom.
- Women that earn more than men are common nowadays in Azerbaijan. Men do not want to be better, earn more and women like their positions as leaders.
- It is difficult to distinguish between man and woman nowadays.

*3. Social equality exists, but not everywhere:*

- According to the number of divorces, one can say that there is gender equality, however, not in each family.
- Women are trying to work hard; however, men are trying harder and they infringe women's rights when it comes to the work. Within families and relationships there are some positive improvements.

- The number of modern families is increasing since the collapse of Soviet Union from 20 to 40 percent. Conservative families are usually ones that migrated to capital (Baku) from rural areas. For girls that have been raised in the modern families it is easier to find a job nowadays than for boys. In the relationship everything is individual and depends on the character of your partner.
- Some of women did not feel gender inequalities within their work; however, almost everyone felt inequalities or some kind of discrimination in the family.
- There is an illusion about gender equality between the sexes; however it is wrong to say that there is gender inequality in every sphere. Women have more rights now; they began to appear on TV and radio more often. Within the family there is a lack of gender equality; however, we don't need gender equality between sexes within the family, but men still have to spend their free time with their kids.

#### *4. Social Equality:*

- Today there are more opportunities for women and new generation is more equal when it comes to the relations within the family rather than older generation (45-50 years old).
- There are more opportunities for women to work in other sectors.

#### *Main reasons for the changes in gender relations after the fall of the Soviet Union:*

From the data we can see that there are three most prominent reasons for changes (inequalities): lack of education, migration process (people from rural areas are migrating to the capital) and mentality (traditional foundations, segregation of duties, culture and religion). The lack of paternal leave is another reason for gender inequalities between men and women that can be seen as a future challenge for the country in order to reduce social inequalities.

### **6.3 Analysis of theories and findings**

Different theories and perspective that have been taken from academic articles and books will be used in order to analyze and support the findings. The starting point of the discussion will be the first stated reason for changes that occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan.

#### *Lack of Education*

As it can be seen from both the background information and the findings, the level of education for women increased since the rise of the Soviet Union. Education itself has been seen as



one of the pivotal tools in achieving gender equality and providing women with more job opportunities. This statement regarding women's participation in higher education has been supported by the findings of Gdi M. Rezai –Rashti a professor of Sociology of Education and Women Studies in University of Western Ontario London, Canada. Even though the research that has been done by Rezai –Rashti concentrates on the case of Iran, she highlights the aspects of education within the Islamic world and its positive effect on the gender regimes. In comparison with Azerbaijan where the changes in women's role within the society have its roots from the Soviet Union period, in Iran the establishment of the Islamic Republic's five-year plan in 1990s, has been seen as an outbreak of women's participation in universities. In the past the key role for all Iranian women was motherhood and childbearing, when men have been seen as an economic support for the family, which is similar with the traditional model of Azerbaijan family (Bahramitash, 2011:49). The majority of Rezai–Rashti's informants stated that high education is significantly transforming the nature of gender regimes in Islamic countries and it increases the age of marriages. This statement has been also mentioned by some of the current research informants, who stated that the high level of education will play a crucial role in females' decision making considering the early marriages. Furthermore, Rezai –Rashti's interviewees highlighted the fact that the consequences of the women being educated was men's anxiety to be inferior or equal to their partners and lose their authority within the family and in the labor market. However, as it has been provided by one of the interviewees regarding the broad world view of some Azerbaijani men as well, she stated that there are still men that are keen to interact with more educated women (Bahramitash, 2011:56). Moreover, the issue of men's authority can be linked to the number of men in Azerbaijan that earn less than their wives and led woman to be a main breadwinner for the family. This situation is common today in Azerbaijan society within the older generation that lived during the Soviet period, while the new generation showed some improvements towards the gender equality within the families. The improvements in gender equality within the new generation can be linked to the high level of education that both male and female part of population equally achieve nowadays.

Thus, the literacy among women in both societies has been seen as a positive element in achieving gender equality due to the fact that women's participation in higher education provide them with more awareness regarding the social inequalities and has an effect on their decisions considering early marriages (Bahramitash, 2011:56).

*Mentality*

However, even though the education level is equal for both sexes, there are still inequalities within the decision making process in politics and public life, and distribution of power and responsibilities in Azerbaijan community (UN, 2004). The reason for these social inequalities, as it has been presented by almost all of current research informants, is the mentality of Azerbaijan society. Mentality being a second most prominent reason absorbed other various aspects such as traditional foundations, culture and religion. If we will look now at the segregation of duties within the Azeri family from the prism of mentality, we can also see that the man has been always seen as a main breadwinner of the family. The image for men, their rights and role as a head of the family were fully dependent on the execution of this function. Therefore, the immense amount of job losses after the fall of the Soviet Union affects men more sorely and might have negative consequences within the family. For instance, by feeling miserable men are frequently trying to get his revenge on the family members and that at the end of the day leads to the drug addiction or alcoholism (Kuli-zade, 2003:281). This can be also linked to the aggression that men have against women, when it comes to the equal rights such as a rights to divorce. The proof of this statement can be the story by my first informant, presented in the field story section, regarding her daughter and consequences of her filing for the divorce.

Thus, according to Kuli-zade mentality is one of the direct factors that influence the relations between men and women and creates social inequalities within the Azerbaijan society. She defines mentality as “the synthesis of the spiritual and material, i.e. outlook on and perceptions of life and world, and the corresponding behavioral principles and life style” (Kuli-zade, 2003:245). Furthermore, she argues that neither religion (Islam) nor social, economic, political factors create and develop the national mentality, but it is rather the mix of public opinions that plays a crucial role in creation of the behavioral principles of the Azerbaijani society. The illusion of social equality during the Soviet Union has been also highlighted in her book, where she states that rights for Azerbaijani women were infringed by the Soviet power and links it again with the negative influence of national mentality. Even though the government provided both sexes with equal rights, it can be seen that women’s participation in decision making processes and in elected authorities have been affected by the double commitments at work and at home (Kuli-zade, 2003:265). This fact is proving the truthfulness of the statement given by one of informant that had been raised during the Soviet rule, where she illustrated women as both economic suppliers and mothers/wives. However, despite these facts Azerbaijan women achieved unprecedented success in their diversified development nowadays.

When it comes to the relations between gender equality and national mentality, Kuli-zade considers that due to the patriarchal ideals which most Azerbaijani females have been dealt with, full gender equality is not conformable when it comes to the national mentality of Azerbaijani people. For instance, within the families, gender inequalities can be seen even nowadays where patriarchal attitudes influence the girls' importance in the society. The son has been always seen as a successor of the family and as a protector of girls' (sister) dignity and honor. Smoking, sexual life for boys can be excused and seen as a norm due to the fact that he is maturing future man, whereas for girls it is forbidden and her behavior is always controlled either by her brother or parents (Kuli-zade, 2003:298). This is another proof of social inequalities and discriminations that exist in Azerbaijan society, and that has been mentioned by current research informants throughout the interview processes.

As a conclusion of Kuli-zade research and chapter regarding the mentality and its relation to the gender issues she demonstrates two sides of the coin. On the one side, the integration of Azerbaijan to the global democratic area and on the other side its oriental values that Azerbaijan has been historically connected. This resulted in the different conflicts in the modern society where contradictions clash in choosing the right behavioral principles (Kuli-zade, 2003:298).

### *Internal migration*

Another factor that has a significant effect on social inequalities, which is influencing the mentality of Azerbaijan society nowadays, is the issue of people's migration from rural to urban areas. The internal migration is dependent on various factors such as economic, social, demographic and psychological aspects. Immense amount of theories exist today that are explaining the issues of rural-urban migration, however the theory provided by Everett S. Lee concentrates more on a larger variety of aspects of internal migration and has been chosen to support the findings of the research. Lee illustrates the migration process as a result of people's decision that are shaped by both "push" (negative) and "pull" (positive) factors. As an example of negative factor he presents high unemployment rates, the lack of education and less access to public services that can pull rural people to move to bigger cities (Lee, 1966:50). In the case of Azerbaijan all the migrants from rural areas are aiming to migrate to Absheron peninsula, mainly to the capital city – Baku. This can be explained by a number of positive aspects that can push rural people to migrate, such as employment opportunities, high levels of education and health care services. Moreover, when it comes to more social and psychological reasons for migration one can see personal sensitivities,

intelligence and restrictions as another obstacles that force people to migrate from rural areas (Lee, 1966: 51).

From research findings one can consider that even though there is an increase in the level of education between sexes in Azerbaijan, there are still huge amount of illiterate girls in the rural areas. Thus, considering the theory by Lee those girls are aiming to move to the capital in order to obtain equal opportunities for education. However, according to my informants it is clear that the migration of families from rural to urban areas is not always guarantee improvements in the educational level of their daughters. Frequently, everything depends on the type of family where girls have been raised. Therefore, whether the conservative families will move to the capital most of the times it will not change their old fashioned views on gender relations, where women have to stick to the traditional gender roles. Moreover, the number of conservative families that migrate to Baku increased and respectively the influence of their understandings and old fashioned views on life, spread to other modern families receding in the capital. Thus, these conservative families are creating social inequalities between men and women, within both spouses' relations and work places.

#### *Lack of Paternal leave*

The final reason for the changes that took place after the fall of the Soviet Union was provided by one informant who stated that the lack of paternal leave is one of the pivotal reasons for gender inequalities in Azerbaijan society nowadays. Paternal leave can be defined as a part of the parental leave national legislation that is providing parents with rights to stay at home in order to take care of their children, both for mothers (maternity) and fathers (paternity) (Morgan, 2009). Neither other informants, nor articles/books that have been used for this research mentioned the issue of paternal leave as a reason for existed inequalities between sexes in Azerbaijan. Thus, one can consider that the establishment of paternal leave can be seen as a future challenge that Azerbaijan society should take into consideration in order to eradicate the gender inequalities between men and women. As an example, in the case of Norway that first passed the law known as "father quota", men had an opportunity to take 5 weeks paid paternal leave. This law increased the number of father nowadays who are taking such leaves and thus increased the women's participation in the labor market. Parental leave's main aim is to keep both parents on the labor market after having a child by dividing first 3 years by half so none of the parents will spend more than 2 years at home. Moreover, it is also important for government to create a policy that will engage men in sharing family responsibilities and taking these paternal leaves (ILO, 2010).

Thus, using the last reason one can state that whether the policy regarding the paternal leave will be established in Azerbaijan it will force men to take further responsibilities for the rearing their children and domestic labor as well as decrease the gender gaps between men and women.

## **VII Conclusion:**

To conclude, one can state that there were number of researches made by other authors regarding the changes in gender relations within the Azerbaijani society. These researches have been focused more on the changes in the women's participation in public activities and the creation of new gender policies; however none of the authors emphasized and analyzed the reasons for the changes. Therefore, the current research had been conducted in order to find changes and reasons behind these changes by conducting interviews with Azerbaijani population, both female and male. The research findings were demonstrated while presenting the field narratives and later summarized where different people's perceptions were illustrated regarding the changes in gender relations and reasons for gender inequalities that exist in Azerbaijan nowadays. Despite the fact that according to the majority of the informants there are still gender misbalances within the Azerbaijan community, the women's role in the society dramatically increased today, in comparison with the past. Thus, one can see the improvements in the gender relations and that new generation is more socially equal when it comes to the division of duties within the family. Meanwhile, the informants of the current research illustrated various reasons behind the changes that happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The findings are answering the research question that indeed there were both positive and negative changes, and moreover it shows that the stated hypothesis, which has seen religious concepts and prejudice in Azerbaijan as main reasons for gender inequalities, is rejected. There are other reasons that affect gender inequalities in Azerbaijan according to the informants that are: a lack of education, mentality and internal migration (rural-urban). The changes and reasons have been taken into account while overcoming the issue of gender inequality in Azerbaijan.

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## Appendix 1

1. *Age/Gender/Marital Status (Married or Single)/ Employed/ Unemployed*
2. *Have you ever heard about gender? What does it mean? How do you understand gender definition? (No - explanation; Yes- continue)*
3. *What kind of relations there were between sexes during the Soviet Union period? Do you think they have managed to reach social equality between men and women?*
4. *What is your opinion, is there gender equality within the Azerbaijan society nowadays? (Please extend your answer)*
5. *In which areas there are gender inequalities in Azerbaijan?*
6. *What is the main reason for gender inequality in your opinion?*
7. *What should be changed in Azerbaijan society in order to reduce these inequalities or you accept this as a part of your life, culture and traditions?*