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SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF ETHNIC AZERBAIJANI WOMEN IN GEORGIA

Abstract

The social integration of ethnic minorities is essential for every democratic state. For Georgia, an ethnically diverse country that sees integration into the Euro-Atlantic space as its primary political priority and follows the EU association agreement, it is crucial to protect the human rights and gender equality of minorities. From this point, a study of minority groups who are at the intersection of different identity and a group affiliation defining factors – ethnicity, religion and gender – is particularly important. This paper focuses on the social integration of Georgian Azerbaijani women, representatives of the country's largest ethnic minority group, who are compactly settled mainly in Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, and Gardabani municipalities of the Kvemo-Kartli region. Using data from secondary sources, this paper considers participation, knowledge of the state language, social networks, and intermarriage – the widely used dimensions of integration of minorities in a society – and finds that the integration level of ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgian society is low. The endogenous and exogenous factors responsible for the low integration are discussed. The paper concludes that the social integration is a two-way process and requires mutual efforts both by the majority society and the group under study.

Keywords: Gender, Georgia, European integration, Social integration, Ethnic minority, Intersection

Introduction

Social integration is a positive process that promotes harmonious interactions among different groups in society, including women, religious and ethnic minorities. Building a socially integrated community has long-term benefits for both the country and the integrating population. Social integration removes prejudices and inequality; increases the value of oppressed and marginalized individuals or groups; creates opportunities for their socio-political participation; and helps create stable and good employment opportunities for traditionally underrepresented groups and individuals. It also promotes capacity building among vulnerable communities to eradicate poverty and social isolation (Cruz-Saco, 2008, pp. 2-3).

Georgia is one of the most ethnically diverse of the former Soviet republics. Ethnic minorities constitute more than 13% of the Georgian population (Geostat, 2014, p.8). Since its independence, Georgia has been struggling with the challenges of the transition period to build a democratic state, improve the situation of women and ethnic minorities, and integrate them into society. The country has made several commitments under important international instruments to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure the rights of ethnic minorities.

For Georgia, which made integration into the Euro-Atlantic space its primary political priority, it is essential to ensure human rights, respect, and protection of ethnic minorities, including minority women, and integrate them into the mainstream society. There is insufficient knowledge of the history and challenges faced by the

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ethnic Azerbaijani community living in Georgia, both in academic and political circles, as well as among the general public (Zviadadze et al., 2018, p.1). From this point of view, a separate study on Georgian Azerbaijanis, especially ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia, is particularly required. Scholarly literature lacks research into the Georgian Azerbaijanis' contemporary socio-political life, the largest ethnic and religious minority group in the country, which is mostly settled in the Kvemo-Kartli region of Georgia. The paper measures the level of social integration of ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia and analyses contributory factors.

Social integration

Social integration can be defined as providing access to resources, participation, and belonging. The term is interpreted quite broadly and can be applied to any social community (both small social groups and nations) (Strobl, 2007). In sociology and some other social sciences, *social integration* is a term used to denote the process of integrating individuals or groups (e.g., members of the underprivileged strata of society, ethnic or religious minorities, etc.) into mainstream society and providing them with the same opportunities, rights and services that the welfare state offers. Minority integration is an important socio-political goal of democratic governments and communities that uphold human rights and values. Social integration is a multidimensional mechanism aimed at peaceful coexistence within a historical, social reality by connecting individuals and groups that differ culturally and ethnically from each other. This process includes common respect for ethnocultural diversity, which does not affect fundamental human rights and does not threaten democratic institutions (Martelli, 2019).

Briefly, social integration is the cohesion and unification of social groups. It means the movement of minority groups such as ethnic minorities into the mainstream of societies. In tolerant and open societies, minority groups can often use social integration to gain full access to the opportunities, rights, and services offered to mainstream society members.

Ethnic and Religious Minorities

The term 'national minority' is ambiguous, meaning that there is no universally accepted definition of it. When defining the term, it should be considered that there is no binding or non-binding international law document that determines which group category minorities belong to and thus, exactly defines minority groups. It should be noted that the term generally accepted in the United Nations system is an ethnic minority. In contrast, in the Council of Europe system, members of this group are called national minorities.

While, in an international treaty, there is no widely agreed, clearly formulated concept of the minority, many approaches are accepted among academics. Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration of Minorities refers to minorities based on national/ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious identities. In the definition proposed by the Venice Commission, an ethnic minority is defined as:

a group which is smaller in number than the rest of the population of a State, whose members, who are nationals of that State, have ethnic, religious or linguistic features different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided by the will to safeguard their culture, traditions, religion or language.

Ethnic Azerbaijanis — densely populated in rural areas of Georgia's Kvemo-Kartli region -are the country's largest ethnic and religious minority group. According to the 2014 official census, 233,024 ethnic Azerbaijanis live in Georgia.

Azerbaijanis in Georgia are compactly settled in the south-eastern part of the country. The majority of the populations of Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, and Gardabani districts of the Kvemo-Kartli region are ethnic Azerbaijanis. There are also Azeri villages in the Tetrtskaro and Tsalka districts of the Kvemo-Kartli region. A significant number of Azerbaijani population is found in Kakheti, Shida (Inner) Kartli, and Mtskheta-Mtianeti areas, in the east of Georgia, Rustavi, the central city of the Kvemo-Kartli region, and the capital Tbilisi (Valehoğlu, 2005, pp.4-8).

Gender

Gender refers to the roles and behaviours attributed to men and women by society (Little et al., 2014, p.370). Social gender roles consist of stereotypes that expect women to be mothers, daughters, caregivers, and the 'weaker sex'. The criteria for males are different and are related to the perception of males as breadwinners, protectors, decision-makers, and the 'stronger sex' (Abrahamyan et al., 2019, p.60).

The traditional division of household labor in the Caucasus specifies men's position as decision-makers and breadwinners, while women's duty is to care for all family members, particularly in the fields of childcare and household tasks. These obligations restrict women in their personal lives and, in most situations, limit their capacity to advance professionally and engage in public and political life (Aliyeva, 2020; Mandl, 2011).

Ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia can be considered as one of the most vulnerable groups of society because of the double burden of both the historically discriminated gender and traditional and religious factors. Although there are religious factors in the different roles attributed to women and men in the Caucasus, the rigid division of gender roles typical of Muslim societies has put ethnic Azerbaijani women in a challenging situation. This fact is also reflected in the integration of the studied group into Georgian society.

Theory of Intersectionality

In 1989, Kimberlie Crenshaw introduced a theory of intersectionality, claiming that individuals are often disadvantaged by various sources of oppression, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities (Crenshaw, 1989). While this theory was initially claimed as a feminist theory, it later expanded, surpassing the explanation of women's oppression. Later, it has been used to describe discrimination in all segments of society. Intersectional feminism is a branch of feminism that claims how various aspects of discrimination in social and political identity coincide ('intersect') with gender. Despite Crenshaw's writing about excluded women in the United States, this theoretical framework can also be applied universally. Patricia Hill Collins theorized that we all exist in a domination matrix where our experiences are determined by gender, race, class, age, and religious structures (Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how a person's social and political identity (e.g. gender, class, race, ethnic origin, and religion) are combined to form discriminatory and privileged regimes. It identifies the advantages and disadvantages felt by humans due to a combination of factors (Bowleg, 2012). In this context, ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia are at the intersection of several factors, such as *gender*, *religion*, and *ethnic origin*. This intersection complicates the situation of minorities and, as Hankinsky and Christoffersen (2008) note, causes more difficulties for academics, who intend to study these and similar groups.

Indicators of social Integration of Ethnic Azerbaijani Women in Georgia

The following indicators are generally used in the literature to measure the level of social integration of ethnic minorities:

Participation – means access and involvement of people from different groups in various socio-political activities – political parties, clubs, voting, sports, etc.). All of this is seen as proof that integration has taken place. The basic point for such views is that if a community is integrated, the public will participate equally and without prejudice in current activities and entertainment (Ager et al., 2008, p.180).

Participation levels in public life in Georgia are low. This fact is particularly evident in the participation of minorities in political life and representation in public bodies and government institutions (Kakhishvili, 2018, p.5). Notwithstanding several programmes and initiatives launched towards integrating ethnic minorities into political life in recent years, no significant progress has been made in this direction (Public Defender's Office, 2018, p.244). Currently, from national minorities, only three MPs represent Ethnic Azerbaijanis, even though this group constitutes the largest minority group of the country (Parliament of Georgia, 2021). Despite the presence of these officials in the Georgian Parliament, the ethnic Azerbaijanis remain underrepresented at almost all levels of government in Georgia, both at the central and local levels. Women have historically been and continue to be underrepresented in Georgia's parliament with only 17% of seats held by them in the current

Parliament of Georgia (Parliament of Georgia, 2021). So far, no ethnic Azerbaijani woman has been represented in the Parliament of Georgia.

In the Kvemo-Kartli region, where Azerbaijanis mostly live, the rate of political participation among women is very low. There are almost no Azerbaijani women representatives at the regional level. According to expert remarks and research from Kvemo-Kartli, there has always been a vast gap in political participation between men and women in the region. It was also concluded that the general lack of interest in politics is more common among women than men (Kachkachishvili et al., 2012, p. 17).

All these factors create significant obstacles to the participation of ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia's socio-political life.

Language – knowledge of the state language is consistently defined as the centre of the integration process (Ager et al. 2008, p.182). It increases the chances of understanding the state language at a higher level, communicating with local people, and understanding their culture.

Studies indicate that the language barrier has been one of the most acute problems negatively affecting minorities' integration into Georgian society (Gabunia, 2014, p.10; Kahraman 2021, p.315). Ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia generally do not have a good command of the state language, which hinders their engagement in the country's social and cultural life, makes them feel marginalized, blocks their representation in Parliament and regional municipalities and negatively affects their economic situation by reducing job opportunities in the public sector (Yilmaz et al., 2016, pp. 256-258). Parallel to such poor command of the state language, the low level of education is also argued as the most significant problem that the ethnic Azerbaijani community experiences (Kahraman 2021, p. 315), and which hinders their integration.

The Azerbaijani language is spoken as the first language among the ethnic Azerbaijani community of Georgia. A decade ago, Georgian, the state language, was spoken little, or not spoken. Till 2008, compared to other ethnic minority groups, the number of Azerbaijanis who did not speak the Georgian language was high (UNAG, Report 2008, p. 38). If the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia were bilingual, speaking their native Azerbaijanian and Russian (even trilingual in some cases) during the Soviet period, many representatives of this ethnic group, especially the generation born during the last years of the Soviet period and early years of independence, became monolingual because the younger generation did not know enough Russian after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Social networks refer to the connections that minority members establish with people belonging to the community's majority group. It is measured by the frequency of interactions with friends from the majority group. Wuthnow et al. (2003, pp. 652-653) emphasize that integration problems result from the characteristics of minorities and the relationships between the majority and minorities.

Osepashvili's study (2013, p. 2) on the Georgian attitudes towards Armenians (the second largest ethnic minority group in Georgia) and ethnic Azerbaijanis shows that social ties between Georgians and ethnic Azerbaijanis are weak and that Georgians know ethnic Armenians better than ethnic Azerbaijanis. Several factors can cause this. One of the main reasons for the weak social ties between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia is the compact settlement of ethnic Azerbaijanis. According to Vervoort et al. (2011, pp. 624-625), the ethnic density of minorities is an essential factor affecting their social integration. Ethnically segregated neighbourhoods are seen as a significant obstacle to ethnic minority integration. Social relations between majority and minority groups are less frequent in ethnically dense areas (Gijsberts et al., 2007, p. 807). Ethnic settlement leads to ignorance and marginalization, thereby preventing social integration. The ethnic Azerbaijanis have less contact with ethnic Georgians on account of their dense settlement in villages adjacent to the Azerbaijani border, mostly in southeast Georgia.

Intermarriage – is another indicator of the degree of social integration. It measures the intermarriage level between the members of minority and majority groups.

Intermarriage between Azerbaijanians and Georgians almost does not exist. *Endogamy* or *internal marriage* – marriage within a particular social group, caste, or ethnic group, rejection of others because it is not suitable for marriage or other close personal relationships – is widely practised in the regions settled by Georgian Azerbaijanis. The lack of mixed marriages also hampers the integration of the Azerbaijani population – and, accordingly, family ties – between Azerbaijanis and Georgians because of a religious ban within the Muslim community (Sikharulidze et al., 2016, p. 77). Marriages between ethnic Azerbaijanis and other nations are

extremely rare (Sanikidze, 2018, p. 252). In the annual survey on socioeconomic issues and political attitudes conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRCC), approval by Azerbaijani minority representatives for ethnic Azerbaijani women to marry Georgian is very low (2%), in comparison with someone of the same ethnicity and religion (92% Azerbaijanis, 64% Turks). The results of the same survey show that unlike the ethnic Azerbaijani respondents, 27% of Georgian women respondents approve marrying Azerbaijanis living in Georgia (Caucasus Barometer, Georgia 2019).

Based on assessment of all the above considered indicators, it can be concluded that the integration level of ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgian society is low.

The Barriers of social Integration of Ethnic Azerbaijani Women in Georgia

The barriers discussed above arise from *exogenous* and *endogenous* factors:

Exogenous or *external* factors are common to all groups in the country, such as an administrative system, a system of laws, etc. In contrast, *endogenous* or *internal* factors are the internal barriers the group faces within its community.

Exogenous or External Factors

Respect for human rights, including those of minorities, is one of the key values of the EU and international legal principles. In its way towards Western integration, Georgia became a party to several international agreements wherein the country has made international and national commitments for minority rights. Following the accession of Georgia to the Council of Europe, the State was expressly obliged to create a legal structure in accordance with international standards of human rights and minority rights, particularly by acceding to the Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM). In 2008, the post of the State Minister for Reintegration (currently called the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality) was created and charged with the implementation of policies to integrate national minorities.

Regarding gender equality, since the first years of independence, the country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1994). It has become a signatory to the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA, 1995). In the design of national legislation, policy structures and processes to ensure gender equality and women's rights, initiatives to prevent and respond to violence against women, and gender-responsive changes to the labour code, the implementation of commitments under CEDAW and the BPFA are visible (Brody, 2018, p. 6).

Georgia joined the Sustainable Development Goals agenda in 2015, and active work has begun to make it possible to successfully enforce the agenda by prioritizing goals and setting up committees. The 5th goal, which aims to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', is prioritized by the Government of Georgia (Bakhturidze et al., 2017, p.4). Besides, in 2017, the country ratified the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Georgia has also modified its National Legislation, passing a Gender Equality Law (2010), which intended to ensure that discrimination in all aspects of public life is inadmissible, to establish adequate conditions for the enjoyment of equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities of men and women, to encourage the eradication and mitigation of all types of discrimination based on gender and Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (2014), which aimed to eliminate all forms of discrimination and to ensure equal protection for all – natural and legal persons, under the law of Georgia, irrespective of ethnicity, language, sex, religion, national or ethnic origin, and other characteristics.

However, according to Bujashvili, while there has been a range of reforms in the institutional minority management policy, the policy's effectiveness has been impacted by the inadequate financial support given by the government to enforce the relevant policy. The specified prioritization of policies for the security of ethnic minorities and civic integration is not reflected at the budgetary level in the financial provision. The fulfilment of many government obligations and responsibilities now depends, as in previous years, on foreign support (Bujashvili, 2018, p. 161).

Georgia officially continues to pursue a multiculturalist policy that recognizes the role of different ethnic groups in the development of the country. This approach is outlined by a multiannual State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration adopted in 2015, along with a 5-year Action Plan. Inclusion of minorities in public life, equal social and economic opportunities, access to quality education, and the enhancement of Georgian language skills among minorities along with other native languages, and the protection of minority culture, are the key objectives of the policy.

The EU advocates Georgian minority policies in EU-Georgia cooperation as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Indeed, the promotion of gender equality and minority rights is one of the goals of the political dialogue set out in the Association Agreement and the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP), which seeks to ensure people's rights, including minorities. The Association Agenda and the VLAP are the primary tools that have set targets and benchmarks for Georgia's approximation to EU standards. In the domain of minority rights, they prioritize the signature, ratification, and implementation of relevant United Nations (UN) and Council of Europe (CoE) instruments aimed at fighting discrimination.

Moreover, the 2021-2027 EU-Georgia Association Agenda expressly calls for improving gender equality, ensuring fair treatment in social, political, and economic life, and encouraging greater integration and tolerance of people from all social groups. Equal treatment and anti-discrimination were also the main focus of the VLAP in the sphere of minority rights, as it aimed to ensure equal access to travel documents and transparency in the process of acquisition of Georgian citizenship.

Emphasizing the need to properly address issues relating to the protection of minority rights in the context of the relationship of the European Union with Georgia, Le Grix argues that not enough attention is paid to the integration component in association instruments. Minority integration efforts-especially in bilingual education, access to information, and civic, political, and cultural participation -are essential elements of minority rights. Consequently, they should be seen by the EU as a pillar in Georgia's advancement of democracy and human rights (Le Grix, 2020, p. 3).

Scholars claim that both political will and the dearth of adequate funds play an essential role in deciding whether or how existing policies ensuring minority protection are implemented in Georgia (Storm, 2019, p. 20; Kadagishvili, 2019, p. 34). Also, it should be noted that today in Georgia lack of teachers for minority education, the pluralist-integrative education model, the alienation of ethnic minority groups, and civil integration issues cause fundamental problems in different ways. Besides, various educational and cultural institutions are unavailable to the population of Kvemo-Kartli (Gelovani et al., 2017, p. 1799). The different patterns of majority-minority relations in the country are influenced by these challenges, public sentiment, and financial difficulties faced by the Georgian state.

Even though incompetence in the state language is widely noted as one of the main reasons for the low participation level of the studied group, even when minorities are fluent in Georgian, problems concerning civil and political participation remain.

The lack of information is indicated as one of the factors limiting the access of minority women to services. Ignorance of the law, women's rights, and opportunities prevent them from fully understanding their real values and strength. The low level of legal literacy/lack of legislative knowledge keeps this group uninformed of their rights.

One of the reasons for the low integration of ethnic Azerbaijani women into Georgian society is their education. Deficiencies in the quality of students' education in minority-language schools continue to result in lower entrance exam scores. Therefore, fewer ethnic Azerbaijanis enrolled in these universities than might otherwise have been the case. Studies show a low higher education level (5%) in ethnic Azerbaijanis of Georgia (UN Women, 2014, p. 5; CRRC, 2019), while this number is much higher (41%) for Georgians (CRRC, 2019). Today, because of the state's targeted measures to teach Georgian in secondary schools, as well as the 1 + 4 programme that stimulates the education of national minorities in Georgian universities, there is a growing interest among youth in learning Georgian as the state language. There is an increasing trend in the number of those who learn this language. According to Gelovani et al. (2017, p. 1799), the younger generation understands the Georgian language better and is more determined to integrate with Georgian society than the older generations. However, despite the positive measures, the Georgian language level among ethnic Azerbaijanis was found to remain low (CRRC 2019). Still, the percentage of Azerbaijani women in Kvemo-Kartli who lack mastery over the Georgian language is high (Gelovani et al., 2017, p. 1799).

Given the current reality, we can conclude that there are still some gaps in Georgia's policy towards the social integration process of ethnic Azerbaijani women of Georgia. The only positive thing we can see in the launch of the bilingual education policy and implementation of 1+4 was the increase in the motivation of young people from ethnic minorities to learn the Georgian language, which may bring positive results in the long run.

Endogenous or Internal Factors

The interrelated internal factors affecting the integration of ethnic Azerbaijani women into Georgian society can be classified as follows:

a. Early marriage

Georgia has the highest child/early marriage rate in Europe (UNICEF, 2016, p. 151). Approximately 14% of women in Georgia marry before 18 (CRRRC 2019, p. 1). Experts in gender studies and women NGO leaders claim that early marriage is the biggest obstacle to women's economic and socio-political activity in Georgia. Although early marriage occurs throughout Georgia, it is more common in certain ethnic and religious communities, including Kvemo-Kartli (UNFPA, 2014: 4). A study by UN Women in an area dominated by ethnic minority groups in Georgia (Azeri, Armenian, etc.) found that 32% of married women were married before turning 18 (UN Women, 2014: 5). A later study also indicates that among the three main ethnic groups of Georgia, ethnic Azerbaijani girls (37.6 %) tend to be at greater risk of child marriage compared to Georgian (12.4 %) and Armenian girls (4.5 % married by age 18) (Hoare, 2020, p.15). While the number of girls getting married at a young age is very high among ethnic Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo-Kartli region, the situation of the men is not different from the country in general (Peinhopf, 2014, p. 9).

The majority of girls who get married before 18 do not seek higher education (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 39). Early marriage is considered as one of the main reasons why girls stop their education (UNFPA, 2014, p.8). In most cases, in rural ethnic minorities, teachers and the local community are generally unaware of the deleterious consequences of early marriage. They are often involved in the arranged marriage process (UNFPA, 2014, p.5).

Target 5.3 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to 'eliminate all harmful practices, such as child/early marriage'. Likewise, Article 37(1) of the Istanbul Convention provides that the contracting parties shall take the necessary legislative or other steps to ensure that forced marriage of an adult or a child is criminalized.

Under Georgian law, the minimum age for marriage is 18. Previously young men or women could only marry at younger ages with the consent of their parents. In 2017, the Public Defender proposal led to a complete ban of marriages involving girls under 18.

Statistics show that since 2017, there has been a small but not drastic change/decrease in the population (both men and women) who got married at 16–19 years old. The number of females who had early marriage is much higher than males of the same age category.

Table 1. Number of Married People Age (16–19) and Gender

Years	Male	Female
2017	386	2213
2018	326	2054
2019	294	1933

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

Despite historical, institutional, and legal developments in recent years in Georgia, the problems with child/early marriage still persist. Most early marriages are not officially registered, as they only occur in churches or mosques (Ellena, 2015).

Bride kidnapping, a practice wherein a man kidnaps the woman he wants to marry (in most cases against her will), has been practised throughout the world and history. This practice is seen in Central Asia, the Caucasus region, and other countries; it is still valid among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia.

Bride kidnapping was a common practice among the ethnic Azerbaijani community in Georgia since its independence and was one of the main obstacles to girls' education. The ethnic Azerbaijani girls were either abducted before they reached high school age or dropped out of high school for fear of being kidnapped. Although reforms in the Georgian law enforcement system have contributed significantly to the decline of this practice, bride kidnapping cases are observed even today. The most critical problem in this matter is that some locals/representatives of the older generation consider it a national custom and support this practice. Such attitudes seem to cause the Georgian authorities to brush the issue under the carpet. State and central governments both pay little attention to hundreds of offences perpetrated against underage children. Yet, at the same time, they vigilantly observe compliance with the rest of the regulations (Sisvadze, 2017).

b. Religious factors

Cultural and religious norms in Muslim societies generally, it is held, prevent women's education (Rahman, 2012, pp. 355-356).

In Georgia, ethnic Azerbaijanis make up the majority of the Muslim population. Many ethnic Azerbaijanis identify religion with their national culture and define it as an integral part of their culture and traditions (Prasad, 2012, p. 5; Sanikidze et al., 2004, p. 25).

Although ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia consider themselves predominantly Muslim, lengthy Soviet rule and politics have marginalized them from their religious values. These cases have led to religious ignorance or misinterpretation of the religion within the community. This approach further restricted the rights and freedoms of ethnic Azerbaijani women. Besides, misinterpretation of Islam and the traditional lifestyle, especially in rural areas, imposes restrictions on the social activities of women (Caucasian House, 2016, p. 22).

c. Family background

Coleman's work shows that families can play a much more crucial role in students' academic success than schools and societies (Coleman et al., 1966). Since then, empirical studies on family background and children's success have revealed that a family's socioeconomic status can affect children's academic achievement more than schools (Cheadle, 2008; Shirin, 2005; White, 1980).

The social status of Azerbaijani families in Georgia is affected by the low level of higher education among them. In the post-Soviet era, the intelligentsia in the villages decreased compared to the Soviet era. As a result, this factor has had a negative impact on the society's inclination towards education.

On the other hand, when the economic situation of families allows them to finance their children's education, it is often preferable to provide education to boys. For centuries, this way of thinking has been associated not only with the ethnic Azerbaijanis but also with the centuries-old lifestyles in the Caucasus and the East (Dudwick, 2005, p. 5). While boys are considered successors and bearers of the surname, girls are perceived as being in a temporary state where they are born, and remain there until they get married. According to the UNFPA research, the ethnic minorities' populated regions of Georgia, including Kvemo Kartli, record a decreasing trend in male births over the last decade, son preference is still prevalent in those regions (UNFPA, 2019).

d. Rural locations

In integration processes, ethnic residential segregation has also been regarded as an obstacle. It is widely debated that minority group members who live in minority groups with co-ethnics are less likely to integrate into the majority society (e.g., Gijsberts et al., 2007, p. 807; Danzer et al., 2013, p. 323). However, communication with the majority population is vital for acquiring native language skills, mutual acceptance promotion, and general acculturation processes (Gijsberts et al., 2007, p. 809).

Owing to the heterogeneity of the allocation of educational resources to rural and urban areas, districts, and schools, school quality should be seen as an essential factor when talking about the relationship between the family background of ethnic Azerbaijani girls in Kvemo-Kartli and their educational achievements. Innovative teaching tools and peers prone to education, concentrating on key schools, significantly impact children's access to next-level education opportunities. It should be taken into account that the majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis live in rural areas of Kvemo-Kartli, where schools are in terrible conditions compared to urban schools. Some

villages are without schools at all. Because of this factor, some students have to go to schools in nearby towns/ villages or to schools in urban areas, if the family economic situation allows.

Many children, especially girls, face difficulties in their long and dangerous journeys to and from school. These students are more likely to travel by public transport. The underdeveloped transport infrastructure complicates communications with remote villages. The villagers are cut off from the cultural and educational environment (Sikharulidze et al., 2016, p. 75). The lack of regularly scheduled public transport to villages and some towns makes it difficult for ethnic Azerbaijani girls living in rural areas to access educational opportunities. The same problems also affect students of higher education institutions.

Conclusion

Studying the social integration of ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia is essential, as social integration is crucial in a democratic society. The paper, which applies commonly used social integration indicators, reveals the low social integration level among ethnic Azerbaijani women in Georgia and identifies the factors affecting it.

Social integration is a two-way process and requires effort of both the majority group and the group under study.

Affirmative actions of the state can positively affect the social integration of minorities. 'Affirmative action' means positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and minorities in employment, education, and culture, from which they were historically excluded (Fullinwider, 2018). Since 2010, Georgia has started using affirmative action policies. The Georgian government has taken a practical step towards the problems faced by national minorities in previous years. The Ministry of Education and Science has implemented the '1 + 4' quota system since 2010. This reform of the quota system launched a one-year Georgian Language Education Programme, which prepares students from ethnic minority groups to undertake smooth transitions to undergraduate programmes. Studies show the effectiveness of this affirmative action on ethnic minorities. The number of enrolled ethnic Azerbaijani students in the '1 + 4' system has increased significantly since 2010 (Tabatadze et al., 2017, p.28).

After gaining independence, Georgia has implemented many reforms to bring democratic values to its society, trying to get the legislation in line with international and European standards and promote gender equality. The country has made many significant improvements in recent years to accelerate women's and girls' progress, prevent discrimination, and promote women's and girls' rights. However, studies show that the implementation of normative actions and policy documents is inadequate, preventing women's and girls' equality (USAID Georgia, 2018).

The minority representatives, in turn, should demonstrate their willingness to engage in social integration by increasing their legal knowledge and education, actively involving in social programmes, and fighting the discrimination they face within their community, which hinders their access to education and resources.

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