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Negotiating Islam, Modernity, and Gender Equality in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Islam, modernity, and gender equality in contemporary Azerbaijan, focusing on the interaction between Islamic ethical principles, post-Soviet social transformation, and the evolving public status of women. Drawing on philosophical, historical, and socio-cultural analysis, the study explores how competing interpretations of religion and modernity shape debates concerning women's rights, family roles, professional participation, and civic agency. It situates these debates within Azerbaijan's distinctive historical trajectory, including the secularising legacy of the Soviet period, the revival of religious identification following independence, and the country's early recognition of women's suffrage during the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The article argues that tensions surrounding gender are not inherent solely in Islamic doctrine but frequently emerge from patriarchal customs, historically contingent legal interpretations, limited religious literacy, and the conflation of cultural practices with normative Islamic principles. The Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition are considered as sources of moral reasoning that affirm human dignity, social responsibility, family integrity, and the ethical value of both women and men. At the same time, the article critically addresses the need to reconsider inherited interpretations that reproduce gender discrimination under the authority of religion. It demonstrates that contemporary Azerbaijani women increasingly combine family commitments, religious or cultural belonging, professional aspirations, and participation in public life. The study concludes that a context-sensitive dialogue between Islamic ethics and modern gender norms can support an understanding of equality grounded in both universal human rights and Azerbaijan's cultural and intellectual traditions.

Keywords

Islam and modernity; gender equality; women's rights; Islamic ethics; post-Soviet Azerbaijan; religious interpretation; social transformation; Azerbaijani women

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Islam, modernity, and gender equality remains one of the most contested questions in contemporary social and political thought. Across Muslim-majority societies, debates concerning women's rights frequently extend beyond legal status or religious doctrine and involve broader questions of cultural identity, political legitimacy, social transformation, and the interpretation of modernity itself. These debates are often framed through a binary opposition in which Islam is associated with tradition and patriarchal authority, whereas modernity is equated with secularisation, individual autonomy, and gender equality. Such a framework is analytically restrictive because it treats both Islam and modernity as internally homogeneous categories and neglects the historically contingent ways in which religious principles, social institutions, cultural practices, and political projects interact.

Azerbaijan offers a particularly important setting in which to reconsider this relationship. The country combines a predominantly Muslim cultural heritage with a constitutionally secular political order, an extensive Soviet legacy, and a post-independence commitment to economic modernisation and international integration. Religious identity in Azerbaijan has consequently developed within overlapping—and sometimes competing—normative frameworks. Islamic ethical traditions coexist with secular law, post-Soviet social structures, national customs, global human-rights discourse, and rapidly changing expectations concerning education, employment, family life, and civic participation. The position of women lies at the centre of these transformations because gender roles frequently become the arena in which competing understandings of religion, national identity, and social progress are articulated.

The Soviet period profoundly altered religious institutions and gender relations in Azerbaijan. State atheism marginalised formal religious knowledge and weakened the intergenerational transmission of Islamic learning. At the same time, Soviet policies expanded women's access to education, salaried employment, and public institutions, although formal equality did not eliminate domestic hierarchies or deeply embedded patriarchal expectations. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, religious identification became more publicly visible, while globalisation, market-oriented reforms, migration, new media, and transnational intellectual exchange introduced additional models of femininity, family, and individual agency. Contemporary Azerbaijani women therefore negotiate several normative systems simultaneously rather than moving along a simple linear path from tradition to modernity.

Azerbaijan's historical experience also complicates the assumption that women's political emancipation is exclusively a recent or externally imported phenomenon. In 1918, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic recognised women's electoral rights at a comparatively early stage in the global development of universal suffrage. This experience established an important national precedent for women's citizenship and equal political participation. Nevertheless, legal recognition alone has not resolved the social and cultural dimensions of gender inequality. Women's access to education and professional life has expanded considerably, yet expectations relating to marriage, motherhood, domestic responsibility, modesty, and family reputation continue to shape their social opportunities. The resulting tensions cannot be explained adequately through legislation alone; they require analysis of the ethical, religious, and cultural narratives through which gender roles are legitimised and contested.

A central problem is the frequent conflation of Islam with historically specific patriarchal customs. Norms originating in local traditions, medieval social structures, selective legal interpretations, or unequal relations of power may be presented as immutable religious obligations. Conversely, religious principles that emphasise human dignity, moral accountability, social justice, education, and reciprocal responsibility are often overlooked. This distinction is particularly important in a society where decades of institutionalised atheism produced substantial gaps in religious literacy. Limited familiarity with the Qur'an, the Prophetic tradition, and the historical diversity of Islamic

jurisprudence can create conditions in which inherited customs are treated as authoritative expressions of Islam without sufficient critical examination.

The question is therefore not whether Islam is inherently compatible or incompatible with modernity. A more productive inquiry concerns which interpretations of Islam are mobilised, by whom, under what social conditions, and with what consequences for women's agency and rights. Islamic intellectual traditions have never been entirely uniform. They contain multiple approaches to justice, family relations, legal responsibility, social welfare, education, and participation in communal life. Likewise, modernity does not represent a single universal cultural model. It includes diverse and sometimes contradictory processes, including secularisation, bureaucratisation, market integration, technological change, individualisation, and the expansion of rights-based political discourse. Examining the relationship between Islam and modernity consequently requires attention to interpretation, historical context, and institutional practice.

This article approaches gender equality not as the erasure of differences between women and men, but as a principle requiring equal human dignity, meaningful access to rights and opportunities, protection from discrimination, and the ability to participate in family, professional, intellectual, and public life. From this perspective, the family and women's public agency should not automatically be treated as mutually exclusive domains. The growing visibility of educated and professionally active Azerbaijani women demonstrates that family commitment, religious or cultural belonging, and public participation can coexist. At the same time, the idealisation of women's family responsibilities must not be used to legitimise their exclusion from decision-making, education, employment, or independent moral agency.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in religion and gender in Muslim societies, Azerbaijan remains insufficiently represented in comparative debates. Existing discussions frequently concentrate either on formal legal equality, Soviet emancipation, post-Soviet religious revival, or the persistence of patriarchal cultural practices. These approaches provide valuable insights but often examine these dimensions separately. Less attention has been given to the intersection of Islamic ethical reasoning, national historical experience, post-Soviet transformation, and contemporary gender subjectivity. This fragmentation makes it difficult to explain why progressive legal norms, high levels of female education, religious revival, and traditional gender expectations can coexist within the same social environment.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how Islam and modernity interact in shaping gender discourse in contemporary Azerbaijan. It asks three interrelated questions: How have Azerbaijan's historical and post-Soviet transformations influenced contemporary understandings of women's social roles? To what extent do prevailing gender restrictions derive from Islamic normative principles, and to what extent do they reflect patriarchal customs or historically contingent interpretations? Finally, how can Islamic ethical resources and modern gender-equality norms be brought into a context-sensitive dialogue without reducing one framework to the other?

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, interpretive approach combining philosophical analysis with historical and socio-cultural contextualisation. It examines the normative concepts through which women's dignity, rights, responsibilities, family roles, and public participation are understood. Particular attention is given to the distinction between foundational Islamic ethical principles and the social practices attributed to religion, as well as to the historical development of women's citizenship in Azerbaijan. The analysis does not seek to construct a single authoritative interpretation of Islam. Rather, it identifies conceptual resources that may support a more nuanced understanding of gender justice within Azerbaijan's cultural and intellectual context.

The article advances two principal arguments. First, many tensions attributed to an inherent conflict between Islam and gender equality arise from the interaction of patriarchal customs, limited religious literacy, selective interpretation, and changing socio-economic conditions. Second, a constructive relationship between Islamic ethics and modern gender norms is possible when equality

is grounded simultaneously in human dignity, social justice, reciprocal responsibility, and meaningful access to public and private forms of agency. This approach moves beyond the opposition between uncritical traditionalism and the assumption that gender equality necessarily requires the abandonment of religious identity.

The study contributes to scholarship on Islam, gender, and post-Soviet transformation by positioning Azerbaijan as a distinct intellectual and socio-historical case rather than as a peripheral example of either the Muslim world or the former Soviet space. It also offers a framework for distinguishing religious norms from cultural practices and for evaluating gender relations through both ethical and rights-based perspectives. The sections that follow examine the conceptual relationship between Islam and modernity, the historical formation of women's rights in Azerbaijan, the transformation of gender roles after independence, and the possibilities for reconciling Islamic ethical commitments with contemporary principles of gender equality.

Literature Review

The relationship between Islam, modernity, and gender has generated extensive debate across religious studies, sociology, political philosophy, and feminist scholarship. Earlier approaches frequently treated Islam and modernity as opposing systems, presenting women's emancipation as dependent on secularisation and the decline of religious authority. More recent scholarship challenges this binary interpretation and demonstrates that Muslim women's social status is shaped by the interaction of religious interpretation, state policy, socioeconomic transformation, cultural traditions, and individual agency. In Azerbaijan, these dynamics are further complicated by the country's pre-Soviet Islamic heritage, seven decades of Soviet secularisation, and the religious revival that followed the restoration of independence in 1991.

Islam, Women, and Competing Interpretations of Modernity

The position of women in Muslim societies cannot be explained solely through reference to Islamic doctrine. Ahmed (1992) argues that many restrictions historically imposed on women originated from patriarchal social structures and political institutions rather than from a single, uniform Islamic model. Her historical analysis demonstrates that interpretations of gender within Muslim societies have changed according to political authority, class relations, local customs, and intellectual traditions. Consequently, the status of women in Islam should be examined through the distinction between religious principles, jurisprudential interpretations, and culturally established practices.

Kandiyoti (1991) similarly emphasises the importance of the modern state in defining and regulating women's rights. Family law, education, employment, political participation, and reproductive policy are not determined exclusively by religion; they are also influenced by state-building strategies and national modernisation projects. This perspective is particularly relevant to Azerbaijan, where the state has historically played a central role in transforming gender relations.

The relationship between Islam and modernity is therefore better understood as a process of negotiation rather than an unavoidable conflict. Maududi (1993) and Hamidullah (2000), despite representing a different intellectual tradition from secular feminist scholarship, maintain that Islamic principles provide women with moral dignity, legal capacity, property rights, and social responsibilities. From this perspective, modern social development does not necessarily require the rejection of Islam. Instead, it requires a contextual interpretation of religious principles that distinguishes the ethical foundations of Islam from historically conditioned patriarchal norms.

Kütükçü's (2011) examination of women in contemporary Turkey also illustrates how secular modernisation, Islamic identity, and women's public participation may coexist in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The Turkish experience is relevant to Azerbaijan because both societies inherited strong traditions of state-led secularisation while retaining predominantly Muslim populations. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's Soviet experience created a distinctive institutional and

cultural environment that cannot be fully explained through comparisons with Turkey or the Middle East alone.

Islamic Feminism and the Reinterpretation of Religious Sources

A major development in contemporary gender scholarship is the emergence of Islamic feminism. Rather than treating religion exclusively as a source of women's subordination, Islamic feminist scholars reinterpret the Qur'an and other foundational sources through principles of justice, equality, and human dignity. Wadud (1999) argues that patriarchal interpretations frequently result from male-centred exegetical traditions rather than from the Qur'anic text itself. Her approach highlights the importance of examining textual context, linguistic structure, and the ethical coherence of the Qur'an.

Mir-Hosseini (2006) likewise distinguishes Islamic jurisprudence, which consists of historically produced human interpretations, from divine revelation. This distinction creates intellectual space for reform because jurisprudential rulings may be reconsidered when they conflict with contemporary understandings of justice and equality. From this perspective, demands for gender equality do not necessarily represent the Westernisation of Muslim societies. They may also emerge from internal Islamic debates concerning ethics, justice, and human rights.

Badran (2009) further demonstrates that secular and religious feminist positions are not always mutually exclusive. In many Muslim societies, activists use both constitutional rights and Islamic ethical arguments to challenge gender discrimination. Such convergences are especially important in Azerbaijan, where the state is constitutionally secular but religious identity remains an influential component of personal and collective life.

Mahmood (2005), however, cautions against defining women's agency only through resistance to religion or traditional authority. Her study shows that religious participation may itself constitute a form of ethical self-formation and social agency. This argument broadens the analytical framework for studying Azerbaijani Muslim women. Their agency should not be assessed only through conformity to secular models of emancipation but also through the meanings women assign to faith, family, education, employment, and public participation.

Gender Transformation in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan occupies a distinctive position within debates on Islam and gender. It is a Muslim-majority country with a constitutionally secular political system, a long history of cultural interaction between Europe and Asia, and a substantial Soviet institutional legacy. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's recognition of women's political rights in 1918 represented an important moment in the history of women's citizenship in the Muslim world. Soviet rule subsequently expanded women's access to education, paid employment, and public institutions. Nevertheless, formal legal equality did not completely eliminate patriarchal expectations within families or society.

Movsumova (1996) situates the question of women within Azerbaijan's broader spiritual and cultural development. Her work highlights the importance of examining gender not only through legal and economic indicators but also through moral values, cultural memory, religious identity, and changing social norms. This approach is essential because gender relations in Azerbaijan have been influenced by Islamic traditions, local customs, Soviet secular ideology, and post-independence national reconstruction.

Tohidi (1996) provides one of the most influential analyses of these overlapping identities. She characterises Azerbaijani women's experience through the tension between Soviet public modernity and private Azerbaijani cultural life. Although Soviet policies increased women's participation in education and employment, traditional gender expectations remained influential within domestic and community relations. Following independence, religious and national identities became more publicly visible, producing new negotiations between secular citizenship, cultural authenticity, and women's rights.

Heyat (2002) expands this analysis by examining Azerbaijani women during the transition from Soviet socialism to independence. She demonstrates that the post-Soviet transformation created both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Women gained access to new forms of civic activity, entrepreneurship, and international engagement, but they were also disproportionately affected by unemployment, economic insecurity, and the weakening of state welfare institutions. Thus, modernisation did not produce a simple or linear improvement in women's circumstances.

Hamidova's discussion of the contemporary status of Azerbaijani women similarly draws attention to changing gender roles, professional participation, family responsibilities, and the search for a new social identity. The modern Azerbaijani woman is increasingly represented as educated, economically active, and publicly engaged. At the same time, she is often expected to preserve traditional responsibilities associated with motherhood, family unity, and cultural continuity. This dual expectation may create tension between individual aspirations and socially prescribed gender roles.

İsmayilov (2000) approaches gender equality through an Islamic framework, arguing that discrimination against women should not automatically be attributed to Islam. This position is relevant in Azerbaijan, where limited knowledge of Islamic teachings may allow patriarchal customs to be represented incorrectly as religious requirements. A critical distinction must therefore be made between Islamic ethical principles and customary practices that developed within particular historical environments.

Law, Social Change, and Continuing Inequalities

The adoption of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Guarantees of Gender Equality in 2006 established an important legal framework for equal rights and opportunities. The law addresses discrimination based on sex and affirms equality in political, economic, social, cultural, and other areas of public life. However, legal recognition does not automatically guarantee substantive equality. The effectiveness of gender legislation depends on institutional implementation, public awareness, access to legal remedies, and changes in social attitudes.

Moghadam (2003) argues that women's empowerment is closely connected to structural conditions such as education, employment, economic independence, demographic change, and political organisation. Applying this framework to Azerbaijan suggests that women's formal educational achievements must be evaluated alongside their representation in decision-making positions, access to economic resources, exposure to gender-based discrimination, and continuing burden of unpaid care work.

Economic globalisation and Azerbaijan's integration into international institutions have contributed to the emergence of new professional and social roles for women. Women increasingly participate in education, medicine, public administration, entrepreneurship, academia, and civil society. Nevertheless, occupational segregation, unequal domestic responsibilities, persistent stereotypes, and differences between urban and rural communities continue to influence women's opportunities. The relationship between Islam and gender must therefore be studied within this broader socioeconomic context rather than reduced to theological disagreement.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides valuable analyses of Islamic interpretations of gender, Soviet secular modernisation, post-Soviet transformation, and the legal development of women's rights. However, these areas are frequently examined separately. International studies of Muslim women often concentrate on Arab countries, Iran, or Turkey, while studies of Azerbaijani women commonly focus on Soviet emancipation, nationalism, or socioeconomic transition. Consequently, insufficient attention has been devoted to the interaction between Islamic revival, secular state institutions, modern gender policy, and women's lived experiences in contemporary Azerbaijan.

Another gap concerns the difference between formal equality and everyday practice. Azerbaijan possesses constitutional and legislative guarantees of gender equality, yet the extent to which these principles transform family relations, religious perceptions, professional opportunities,

and community expectations requires further examination. There is also a need to investigate how Azerbaijani women themselves interpret the relationship between Islamic identity and modernity rather than assuming that religious commitment and gender equality are necessarily incompatible.

The present study addresses these gaps by analysing gender as an intersection of religious interpretation, historical experience, legal reform, and socioeconomic modernisation. It proceeds from the understanding that Islam is neither an inherently fixed obstacle to women's advancement nor a sufficient guarantee of equality. The consequences of religion for women depend on how sacred sources are interpreted, how laws are implemented, how institutions distribute opportunities, and how women exercise agency within changing social conditions. Azerbaijan therefore offers a significant case for understanding how a secular Muslim-majority society negotiates continuity and transformation in the field of gender relations.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on document analysis and interpretive thematic analysis. This approach was selected because the research seeks to explain how the relationship among Islam, modernisation, and gender has been constructed within religious texts, academic scholarship, legal frameworks, and Azerbaijan's specific historical experience. Qualitative document analysis is appropriate for examining the meanings, assumptions, and normative positions embedded in written sources and for identifying recurring patterns across texts produced within different intellectual and institutional contexts.

The study did not seek to measure individual religiosity or public attitudes through surveys. Nor did it attempt to establish causal relationships between religious affiliation and women's socioeconomic outcomes. Instead, it investigated how women's rights, responsibilities, identities, and social roles are conceptualised at the intersection of Islamic ethics, secular modernisation, national legislation, and post-Soviet social transformation.

Research Questions

The analysis was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are women's moral, social, economic, and educational rights represented in selected Islamic and gender-related literature?
2. How have Soviet secularisation and post-Soviet transformation influenced gender relations in Azerbaijan?
3. What tensions exist between formal gender equality and socially embedded gender expectations?
4. To what extent can Islamic identity and modern forms of female agency coexist in contemporary Azerbaijan?
5. How can the distinction between Islamic principles, jurisprudential interpretations, and customary practices improve understanding of gender relations?

Selection of Sources

The documentary corpus was constructed through purposive selection. Sources were included when they addressed at least one of the following subjects: women in Islam, Islamic interpretations of gender, gender relations in Azerbaijan, Soviet and post-Soviet modernisation, women's citizenship, family relations, or legal guarantees of equality.

The primary textual source was an Azerbaijani translation of the Qur'an (Qəni oğlu & Bilal oğlu, 2000). The analysis focused particularly on passages concerning human creation, spiritual responsibility, reciprocal marital rights, property, social cooperation, and moral accountability. These passages were interpreted in conjunction with Muslim intellectual works discussing Islamic ethics and women's position, including Hamidullah (2000), Maududi (1993), and İsmayilov (2000).

A second category consisted of historical, philosophical, and sociological studies of women in Azerbaijan and comparable Muslim societies. These included Movsumova's (1996) study of women in

Azerbaijan's spiritual culture, Tohidi's (1996) analysis of public and private gender identities in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Heyat's (2002) examination of Azerbaijani women during political and economic transition, and Kütükçü's (2011) analysis of women, Islam, and modernisation in Turkey.

The third category comprised internationally recognised scholarship on gender and Islam. The works of Ahmed (1992), Kandiyoti (1991), Mernissi (1991), Wadud (1999), Moghadam (2003), Mahmood (2005), Mir-Hosseini (2006), and Badran (2009) were included to position the Azerbaijani case within broader debates on Islamic feminism, secular reform, state power, women's agency, and the historical construction of gender norms.

The legal dimension was examined principally through the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Guarantees of Gender Equality adopted in 2006. These sources were used to distinguish legally recognised equality from the informal cultural and institutional practices that may shape women's everyday experiences.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, all selected texts were read to identify passages relating to women's rights, family roles, religious obligations, education, employment, property, public participation, veiling, motherhood, and personal autonomy. Second, the identified passages were assigned preliminary codes. These included "spiritual equality," "legal capacity," "family responsibility," "education," "economic participation," "religious identity," "state-led emancipation," "customary patriarchy," "female agency," and "formal versus substantive equality."

Third, related codes were grouped into broader analytical themes. Four dominant themes emerged:

1. equality as an ethical and spiritual principle;
2. the distinction between religion and patriarchal custom;
3. the coexistence of Islamic identity and modern female agency;
4. the gap between formal rights and substantive equality.

Finally, the themes were interpreted comparatively. Islamic sources were examined alongside feminist and sociological scholarship to identify both convergences and disagreements. Azerbaijan's historical experience was analysed across three broad contexts: the pre-Soviet reformist period, Soviet state-led secularisation, and post-1991 religious and national revival.

The study followed an interpretive rather than doctrinal theological method. It did not claim to provide an authoritative religious ruling. Its purpose was to examine how selected texts and scholarly traditions explain the relationship between Islam, women's rights, and modern social change.

Research Quality and Reflexivity

Analytical credibility was strengthened through source triangulation. Religious texts, legal documents, historical studies, and contemporary gender scholarship were compared rather than relying on a single intellectual tradition. This procedure reduced the risk of treating either secular modernisation or religious interpretation as a complete explanation of women's position.

Particular attention was given to the difference between normative statements and empirical descriptions. A religious or legal text may prescribe equality without demonstrating that equality exists in everyday life. Conversely, the existence of discriminatory practices does not necessarily prove that such practices derive directly from religion. This distinction is central to the study because gender inequality may be produced through the combined influence of customary norms, socioeconomic structures, institutional limitations, and selective religious interpretation (Ahmed, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1991; Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, its conclusions are based on document analysis and cannot be generalised to the attitudes of all Azerbaijani women or Muslims. Second, the selected literature contains different methodological and ideological orientations. Some sources adopt

theological or normative positions, whereas others use feminist, historical, or sociological frameworks. Third, the study does not contain original interviews with religious women, secular women, religious authorities, policymakers, or civil-society representatives. It therefore cannot fully capture the diversity of women's lived experiences.

Furthermore, the analysis does not compare urban and rural communities or examine differences associated with age, education, class, marital status, religious practice, or regional background. These limitations indicate the need for future mixed-method research combining document analysis with interviews, surveys, and comparative fieldwork.

Ethical Considerations

The study used publicly available academic, legal, and religious texts and did not involve human participants or personally identifiable data. Consequently, informed consent and institutional ethical approval were not required. Nevertheless, interpretive care was exercised to avoid presenting a single interpretation of Islam or a single model of Azerbaijani womanhood as universally representative.

Results

Theme 1: Equality Is Primarily Established as a Moral and Spiritual Principle

The first major finding is that the selected Islamic sources establish women and men as morally responsible human beings whose religious value is determined by faith and ethical conduct rather than sex. The Qur'anic account of humanity's creation from a single origin provides an ethical foundation for shared human dignity (Qur'an 4:1). Similarly, the Qur'an addresses believing women and men as parallel moral subjects and associates both with equivalent religious responsibilities and rewards (Qur'an 9:71; 16:97; 33:35).

This finding is consistent with Wadud's (1999) argument that the Qur'an's ethical worldview cannot be reduced to isolated legal verses detached from its broader principles of justice, reciprocity, and human accountability. Mir-Hosseini (2006) likewise maintains that the egalitarian ethical message of Islam must be distinguished from historically produced jurisprudential rules. Accordingly, spiritual equality does not automatically produce identical social roles, but it provides a normative basis for questioning practices that deny women dignity, education, property, or meaningful participation.

The analysis also identified reciprocity as an important principle in marital relations. Qur'an 2:228 recognises that women possess rights corresponding to their responsibilities within marriage. However, the same verse has been interpreted in different ways across historical and jurisprudential traditions. This variation supports the argument that religious texts do not operate independently of interpretive authority. Their social effects depend on who interprets them, which methods are used, and how interpretation is translated into law and everyday practice (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1991; Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

The selected Islamic literature also associates women with independent legal and economic capacities. Qur'an 4:7 recognises women's inheritance rights, while Qur'an 4:32 acknowledges the economic value of what women and men earn. Hamidullah (2000) and Maududi (1993) interpret such provisions as evidence that women possess an independent legal identity and may own, inherit, and manage property. The documentary analysis therefore found limited support for claims that Islam inherently denies women all economic or social agency.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that spiritual equality should not be equated automatically with substantive gender equality. Religious recognition may coexist with unequal family authority, unequal inheritance practices, occupational segregation, or restrictions on women's mobility. The distinction between ethical principle and institutional outcome is therefore essential (Kandiyoti, 1991; Moghadam, 2003).

Theme 2: Patriarchal Custom Is Frequently Presented as Religious Obligation

The second theme concerns the blurred boundary between religion and customary patriarchy. Several sources indicate that restrictive practices are frequently justified in religious language even

when their origins are associated with local customs, historical power relations, or male-dominated interpretive institutions (Ahmed, 1992; Badran, 2009; Mernissi, 1991).

Ahmed (1992) demonstrates that gender regimes in Muslim societies developed through the interaction of religion, empire, class, family organisation, and political authority. Therefore, no single practice can be described as “Islamic” merely because it occurs in a Muslim-majority society. Kandiyoti (1991) similarly shows that family law and women’s citizenship have been shaped by state projects and political negotiations as much as by religious doctrine.

This distinction has particular importance in Azerbaijan. Decades of Soviet atheism weakened formal religious knowledge without necessarily eliminating patriarchal attitudes. Traditional expectations survived in family and community life even where religious institutions had been marginalised. Consequently, post-Soviet patriarchal practices cannot be attributed exclusively to the revival of Islam. They may reflect pre-Soviet customs, Soviet gender contradictions, socioeconomic insecurity, and selective post-independence reconstructions of national identity (Heyat, 2002; Movsumova, 1996; Tohidi, 1996).

Tohidi (1996) describes a historically significant tension between women’s public Soviet identity and their private Azerbaijani identity. Women could be highly educated and professionally employed while remaining subject to conservative expectations regarding marriage, domestic work, sexuality, and family honour. The findings therefore challenge the assumption that employment and education alone eliminate patriarchal relations.

The analysis further indicates that limited religious literacy may enable customary restrictions to be presented as obligatory Islamic rules. When communities lack access to historically informed and gender-sensitive religious education, dominant cultural practices may acquire religious legitimacy without critical examination. Islamic feminist scholarship responds to this problem by reopening interpretation and distinguishing revelation from human jurisprudence (Badran, 2009; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Wadud, 1999).

Theme 3: Islamic Identity and Modern Female Agency Can Coexist

The third finding is that Islamic identity and modernity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The analysed literature contains substantial evidence that Muslim women may combine religious observance with higher education, professional employment, civic engagement, political participation, and personal decision-making (Badran, 2009; Kütükçü, 2011; Mahmood, 2005).

This finding challenges classical secularisation theories that expected modernisation to produce the gradual disappearance of religion. In Azerbaijan, post-Soviet religious revival has occurred alongside economic globalisation, digital communication, expansion of higher education, and the diversification of women’s public roles. The resulting gender identities are neither simply “traditional” nor completely “Western.” They are hybrid identities negotiated across religious, national, familial, and professional contexts (Heyat, 2002; Tohidi, 1996).

Veiling provides a particularly significant example. A secular interpretation may understand the veil exclusively as a sign of women’s oppression. However, Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that religious practices may also express ethical discipline, belonging, and self-formation. Badran (2009) and Wadud (1999) similarly show that religious commitment does not automatically prevent women from advocating education, dignity, legal reform, or social participation.

This does not mean that all forms of veiling are freely chosen or that religious dress is unaffected by family and community pressure. Rather, the meaning of the veil is context-dependent. It may represent religious conviction, moral identity, cultural belonging, resistance to objectification, family expectation, social conformity, or a combination of these factors. The analysis therefore rejects both the assumption that every veiled woman is oppressed and the opposite assumption that every decision to veil is entirely independent of social power.

The Azerbaijani case reveals an additional dimension of this coexistence. Women may regard motherhood and family responsibility as central elements of their identity while simultaneously

pursuing education, employment, and public participation. These orientations should not automatically be treated as contradictory. However, the elevation of motherhood becomes problematic when it is used to limit women to unpaid domestic roles or to deny them professional and political opportunities (Moghadam, 2003).

Accordingly, women's agency should be evaluated through their ability to make meaningful choices within the conditions available to them. Mahmood (2005) cautions that agency cannot be restricted to open resistance against religious or cultural norms. At the same time, choices occur within unequal structures and should not be romanticised as entirely free from social constraints. A balanced interpretation must therefore recognise both women's subjectivity and the institutional conditions that shape their decisions.

Theme 4: A Gap Persists Between Formal Rights and Substantive Equality

The fourth theme is the difference between legally established equality and women's effective ability to exercise their rights. Azerbaijan's secular legal order recognises equality between women and men, while the 2006 Law on Guarantees of Gender Equality prohibits sex-based discrimination in major areas of public life. This legal framework constitutes an important institutional achievement. Nevertheless, documentary evidence suggests that formal equality alone cannot transform historically embedded gender expectations.

Soviet modernisation expanded women's literacy, education, and labour-force participation. However, it also produced a "double burden," under which women combined paid employment with primary responsibility for domestic labour and childcare (Heyat, 2002; Tohidi, 1996). Post-Soviet market transformation created new opportunities for entrepreneurship and civic engagement but also weakened forms of social protection and intensified economic insecurity for many women (Heyat, 2002).

Moghadam (2003) argues that substantive empowerment requires more than constitutional recognition. It also depends on access to employment, income, property, organisational participation, decision-making authority, and supportive public services. From this perspective, an increase in women's educational achievement does not necessarily demonstrate equality if women remain underrepresented in senior leadership or continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work.

The findings also suggest that modernisation produces uneven outcomes. Urban, educated, and professionally employed women may have greater access to institutional resources than women living in economically disadvantaged or socially conservative environments. Although the present document-based study cannot measure such differences, the literature indicates that gender relations are mediated by class, geography, age, family structure, education, and religiosity (Heyat, 2002; Moghadam, 2003; Tohidi, 1996).

Formal equality and religious ethics can therefore support one another, but neither is self-executing. Legal provisions require enforcement, while religious principles require interpretation consistent with dignity and justice. Where institutional enforcement is weak and patriarchal custom remains socially authoritative, both secular law and religious ethics may fail to protect women in practice.

Discussion

Islam and Modernity as Negotiated Rather Than Oppositional Categories

The findings challenge the assumption that Islam and modernity constitute two irreconcilable systems. Azerbaijan demonstrates that a society can be constitutionally secular, historically shaped by Soviet modernisation, culturally connected to Islam, and simultaneously engaged with global models of education, employment, and citizenship. The relationship among these elements is dynamic rather than binary.

The results support Badran's (2009) argument that religious and secular gender discourses may converge around shared demands for justice and dignity. They also correspond with Mir-

Hosseini's (2006) distinction between divine revelation and historically constructed jurisprudence. If jurisprudential interpretation is understood as a human activity, religious thought can respond to changing social conditions without requiring the abandonment of Islamic identity.

At the same time, the compatibility of Islam and gender equality should not be asserted only at the level of abstract principle. Whether religious discourse supports women's rights depends on interpretive institutions, educational access, legal structures, and power relations. A theoretical commitment to women's dignity may have little practical effect when women lack access to decision-making, economic independence, or effective legal remedies (Kandiyoti, 1991; Moghadam, 2003).

The Azerbaijani Model of Gender Modernisation

Azerbaijan's gender development cannot be reduced to either Islamic tradition or Soviet emancipation. The country's early recognition of women's political rights, Soviet expansion of female education and employment, post-independence legal reforms, and contemporary religious revival have produced a multilayered gender order.

The findings confirm Tohidi's (1996) observation that Azerbaijani women historically moved between modern public roles and more conservative private expectations. This division helps explain why high levels of education and professional participation can coexist with persistent assumptions regarding women's domestic responsibilities. Heyat (2002) similarly demonstrates that post-Soviet transition did not simply liberate or disadvantage women; it restructured the opportunities and risks they encountered.

The Azerbaijani experience therefore suggests that modernisation is not a linear movement from tradition to secular individualism. Instead, women combine elements of inherited family culture, professional aspiration, national identity, Islamic ethics, and global modernity. Such combinations should be analysed as substantive social formations rather than as incomplete versions of Western modernisation.

Rethinking Women's Agency

The analysis also has implications for the concept of agency. Liberal feminist approaches often associate agency with autonomy from family, religion, and tradition. This perspective is important for identifying coercion and discrimination but may fail to recognise forms of agency expressed through religious commitment, caregiving, or moral self-discipline. Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that women may actively cultivate religious identities rather than merely submit to male authority.

However, recognising religious agency should not prevent critical analysis of unequal power. A woman's commitment to family or religious dress may be meaningful and voluntary, but similar practices may be imposed on other women. The analytical task is therefore not to assign a single meaning to religious behaviour but to examine the conditions under which choices are made.

For Azerbaijan, this implies that women's religious identity should not be treated automatically as evidence of traditionalism. Nor should professional employment be regarded as sufficient proof of emancipation. Agency is multidimensional and may involve the simultaneous pursuit of religious observance, education, employment, family membership, and public participation (Badran, 2009; Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999).

From Legal Equality to Substantive Equality

The distinction between formal and substantive equality is among the most significant implications of the study. Azerbaijan's legal framework establishes equality as a state principle, but the social realisation of this principle depends on implementation. Legal reform must be supported by public education, accessible remedies, institutional accountability, economic opportunity, and a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities.

This conclusion aligns with Moghadam's (2003) argument that women's status must be evaluated through material and organisational indicators rather than legal language alone. It also supports Kandiyoti's (1991) emphasis on the state's role in constructing gender relations. Legislation

can challenge discrimination, but it may also remain symbolic when implementation mechanisms are insufficient.

Religious discourse can contribute to substantive equality by challenging customs falsely attributed to Islam and highlighting ethical principles of justice, education, property rights, and reciprocal responsibility. Nevertheless, religious reinterpretation cannot substitute for effective law, social policy, and institutional reform. Sustainable gender equality requires cooperation among legal institutions, educational organisations, religious scholars, civil society, families, and women themselves.

Theoretical Implications

The findings support an intersectional and historically contextual model of gender relations. Women's position in Azerbaijan is not determined by a single variable such as religion. It emerges through the interaction of Islamic interpretation, Soviet institutional legacies, national culture, economic restructuring, family organisation, education, and state policy.

This model avoids two forms of reductionism. The first is religious essentialism, which attributes all gender inequality in Muslim societies to Islam. The second is secular triumphalism, which assumes that secularisation automatically eliminates patriarchy. Azerbaijan's Soviet experience demonstrates that patriarchal relations may persist under officially atheist institutions, while contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship shows that religious reasoning may support demands for gender justice (Badran, 2009; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Tohidi, 1996).

The study therefore proposes that the relationship between Islam and modernisation should be analysed through three interconnected levels: normative principles, institutional arrangements, and lived practices. Normative principles concern what religious and legal texts declare. Institutional arrangements concern how states, families, religious organisations, and labour markets distribute authority and resources. Lived practices concern how women interpret, negotiate, accept, or challenge these conditions in everyday life.

Practical Implications

Several practical implications follow from the analysis. First, gender education in Azerbaijan should distinguish Islamic teachings from patriarchal customs and misinformation. Second, public policy should move beyond formal declarations and address the institutional conditions affecting women's employment, leadership, family responsibilities, and access to justice. Third, religious and secular stakeholders should avoid presenting gender equality as an imported challenge to national or Islamic identity.

Educational initiatives should include historically informed discussion of women's contributions to Azerbaijani society and Islamic civilisation. Religious literacy can also help prevent selective or inaccurate interpretations from being used to justify discrimination. At the same time, gender-sensitive religious education should be accompanied by legal literacy, enabling women to understand and exercise their constitutional and statutory rights.

Future research should incorporate interviews with women from different age groups, regions, educational backgrounds, and levels of religious practice. Comparative research involving urban and rural communities would clarify how socioeconomic conditions influence gender attitudes. Surveys could examine whether religious knowledge, rather than religiosity alone, is associated with more egalitarian attitudes. Further studies should also explore men's perceptions of caregiving, professional equality, and family authority because sustainable gender reform requires changes in both women's and men's social roles.

Conclusion

The study finds that Islam, modernisation, and gender equality in Azerbaijan are connected through a complex process of historical negotiation. Selected Islamic sources provide ethical foundations for women's dignity, spiritual responsibility, education, property, and participation.

However, the practical meaning of these principles is shaped by interpretation, institutional power, and customary norms.

Azerbaijan's experience demonstrates that secularisation alone does not remove patriarchy and that religious revival does not necessarily eliminate women's agency. Contemporary Azerbaijani women may combine Muslim identity with education, professional activity, civic participation, and modern aspirations. Nevertheless, the persistence of unequal domestic expectations and informal social constraints indicates that formal equality has not resolved every dimension of gender inequality.

The most productive analytical approach is therefore neither to idealise religious tradition nor to treat it as an unchanging obstacle. Gender equality requires critical engagement with Islamic interpretation, consistent implementation of secular law, socioeconomic opportunity, and recognition of women as active participants in defining their identities and social roles. In this framework, modernisation does not require the erasure of religious identity; it requires institutional and interpretive conditions through which dignity, justice, and meaningful equality can be realised.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relationship among Islam, modernisation, and gender in Azerbaijan cannot be adequately explained through a simple opposition between religious tradition and secular progress. Gender relations have developed through the interaction of Islamic ethical principles, customary practices, Soviet secularisation, post-independence nation-building, legal reform, and socioeconomic transformation. Azerbaijan therefore represents a distinctive case in which Muslim cultural identity coexists with a constitutionally secular state and a historically established tradition of women's participation in education, employment, and public life.

The thematic analysis indicates that the selected Islamic sources recognise women and men as morally accountable individuals and affirm principles relating to human dignity, education, property ownership, economic activity, and reciprocal family responsibilities. Nevertheless, a fundamental distinction must be maintained between the normative principles of Islam and the patriarchal customs or historically conditioned jurisprudential interpretations that may be presented as religious obligations. Practices observed in Muslim societies cannot automatically be attributed to Islam without examining their historical, cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic origins.

The findings further show that secular modernisation does not inevitably eliminate gender inequality. Although Soviet policies substantially expanded Azerbaijani women's access to education and paid employment, they did not fully transform gendered responsibilities within the family. Women's public participation often developed alongside their continued primary responsibility for childcare and domestic labour. Similarly, the post-Soviet period created new opportunities for professional, civic, and religious expression while also producing economic uncertainty and renewed debates concerning national identity, family values, and women's social roles.

Contemporary Azerbaijani women should consequently not be classified through a rigid distinction between the "traditional Muslim woman" and the "modern secular woman." Religious observance may coexist with academic achievement, professional employment, civic engagement, and individual agency. Practices such as veiling may carry different meanings—including faith, moral discipline, cultural belonging, personal identity, social expectation, or resistance to objectification—and must therefore be interpreted within their particular social contexts. Recognising this diversity avoids both the assumption that religious women lack agency and the uncritical belief that every religiously framed practice is free from unequal power relations.

A further conclusion concerns the difference between formal and substantive equality. Azerbaijan has established an important legal framework for gender equality, but the recognition of equal rights does not automatically guarantee their consistent realisation. Substantive equality requires effective enforcement of legislation, access to education and economic resources, representation in decision-making, protection from discrimination, and a more equitable distribution of family and caregiving responsibilities. Religious reinterpretation may contribute to this process by

challenging patriarchal customs inaccurately attributed to Islam, but it cannot replace institutional accountability and social policy.

The study is limited by its reliance on documentary evidence and does not claim to represent the experiences of all Azerbaijani women. Future research should combine textual analysis with interviews, surveys, and comparative studies involving women and men from different regions, generations, socioeconomic groups, and levels of religious practice. Particular attention should be given to the relationship between religious literacy and gender attitudes, the experiences of women who combine professional and religious identities, and the differences between formal rights and everyday practices.

Ultimately, gender equality in Azerbaijan should not be approached as a choice between Islam and modernity. It should be understood as an ongoing process of ethical interpretation, legal implementation, institutional reform, and social negotiation. A sustainable model of development must respect religious and cultural identity while ensuring that women possess the genuine capacity to make decisions, pursue education and professional development, participate in public life, and exercise their legal and human rights. Such an approach would allow Azerbaijan to advance a context-sensitive model of gender equality grounded in justice, dignity, mutual responsibility, and equal citizenship.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it is a conceptual and interpretive analysis based exclusively on publicly available scholarly, historical, legal, and religious sources. The research did not involve human participants, personal data, clinical interventions, or animal subjects.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable. The study did not involve human participants.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. The manuscript contains no identifiable personal information, individual case material, photographs, or other content requiring consent for publication.

Author Contributions

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Data Availability

No original dataset was generated or analysed during this study. The article is based on publicly available scholarly literature, historical materials, legal documents, and religious sources cited in the manuscript.

Materials Availability

Not applicable. No original research materials, experimental instruments, questionnaires, or proprietary resources were developed or used.

Code Availability

Not applicable. No software, programming code, computational model, or statistical analysis was used in this study.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

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Author's Declaration

The author confirms that the manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not simultaneously under consideration by another journal. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged, and the manuscript has been prepared in accordance with recognised principles of research and publication ethics.