

# CAUCASUS HISTORY – Gender

## Overview

In ancient times, although the roles of women were almost always restricted to domestic work, there were times when women warriors joined in military operations when needed. In the following centuries, the equality between men and women and the equal participation of women in political and social life was respected. Women were considered independent and legally, economically and politically active persons. The Soviets encouraged women to become literate and participate in social life and activities since the political, economic and cultural circumstances increased the demand for women's participation. However, women's status still remained lower than that of men, and top-level political and business jobs were less available for women and their choices were much more limited than men's in all the Caucasus states.

## ANCIENT PERIOD

### SOUTH CAUCASUS:

**GEORGIA:** Under the influence of Persian culture, polygamy was practiced. The roles of women and their individual freedom were severely limited in society. Women took care of domestic work.

Women traditionally held a prestigious place in Georgian society and were treated with great respect. Nevertheless, they were sometimes regarded as a minor evil, disease spreading spirits (dobilni).

**ARMENIA:** In ancient times, there were female rulers in Armenia like Erato, Parandzem, Zapel. The kings' wives also had important role in courts. The women were considered as head of the family structure. They even joined in military operations.

**AZERBAIJAN:** During the tribal community, people were united via a kinship of mother line. Women played a very important role. In Caucasian Albania, there were women warriors, Scythian, Sarmatian and Saka, fighting on horseback.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, this matriarchal family structure began to disappear after the Bronze Age, when the male labor required more power and strength to handle hardwork.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, the semi-nomadic Sakas allowed their women to have many rights and to serve in the army.

### NORTH CAUCASUS:

**CHECHNYA:** According to ancient sources, there were warrior women in the North Caucasus. They were isolated from men and took part in expeditions, rode on horseback, and hunted.

## Discussion/Questions

1. What was the role of the women in the military?

## Readings

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## POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

### SOUTH CAUCASUS:

**GEORGIA:** Women played a significant role in medieval Georgia. For example, the Virgin Mother was considered the protector of Georgia and Saint Nina spread Christianity in Iberia. There were female rulers: Queens Tamar - the first ruler of Georgia, Rusudan (Queen Regnant) from the Bagratuni dynasty - ruled Georgia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Ketevan of Kakheti ruled Georgia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The 12<sup>th</sup> century medieval epic poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* was dedicated to the queen Tamar, and the other characters of the poem were all women.



Georgia adopted chivalric attitudes towards women. Concepts such as the Earth (dedamitsa), mother language (deda ena), central pillar of house (dedabodzi), the Sun (mze) and capital (dedakalaki) all had female meanings.

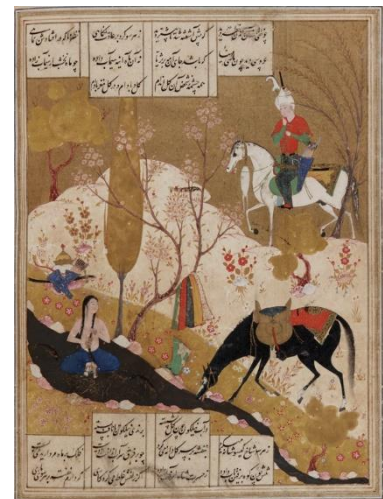
The King George V the Brilliant's *Dzeglisdeba* (Collection of Laws) included articles defining legal status of women.

**ARMENIA:** The equality between men and women was respected in Armenia as mentioned in the rules of *Ashtishat* from 4<sup>th</sup> century which allows women to administer the family property, and *Shahapivan* from 5<sup>th</sup> century which gives equal rights to both women and men to decide their marriage.

The women's rights were also mentioned in secular legal documents in the *King Vachagan's Codex* from the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

In medieval Armenia, although the society was patriarchal, women were highly respected. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenian scholar Mkhitar Gosh's *Law code* (Datastanagirk) forbade violence against women and it contained severe penalties against anyone who violated it. It described the role of men and women in the family, equality between men and women and expressed the importance of women having an education, marriages managed by mutual consent, and of the recognition of women's honor, respect, and dignity. Armenian women were also allowed to have property, and to sell or buy lands without with their husbands' consent.

**AZERBAIJAN:** In medieval Azerbaijan, women played an important role in society. Besides household work, women took part in cultivating the land and even became warriors when needed. In the medieval miniatures, women were depicted armed and fighting on horseback. The medieval Azerbaijani epos *Kitabi-Dede Korkut* written in the 11<sup>th</sup> century mentioned women warriors like Burla khatun and Banuchichak. Mansati Ganjavi was the first female poet in Azerbaijan in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Another poet, Nizami Ganjavi in his poem *Khosrov and Shirin* depicted the wife of the Sasanid king Khosrov II, Shirin as a brave women riding a horse.



## **NORTH CAUCASUS:**

**CHECHNYA:** Medieval Chechen society's structure was firmly based on equality. The Chechen code of honor required moral and ethical behavior, generosity and protection of women's honor.

### **Discussion/Questions**

1. What forms of gender roles and relations were assimilated by Muslim Chechens and Azerbaijanis?
- 2- How do Christian Georgians and Armenians describe and explain gender roles and practices in their society?

### **Readings**

- 1-Khachikyan, A., History of Armenia, A Brief Review, Edit Print, 2010.
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- 5-Zardabli, I. B., The History of Azerbaijan: from ancient times to the present day, Rossendale Books, 2004.
- 6- Historical Dictionary of Georgia, The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2007.
- 7- Edge of Empires, A History of Georgia, Reaktion Books, 2017.
- 8- Taegamadze, Z. "Social and Legal Status of Women in Medieval Georgia", *International Journal of Culture and History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2017.

## **EARLY MODERN PERIOD**

### **SOUTH CAUCASUS**

**GEORGIA:** At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the king Vakhtang VI wrote *The Book of Law* depicting the legislative life and cultural transformations of Georgia. *The Book of Law* also had articles protecting women's rights. For example, article 64 showed that if a woman complained of domestic violence her husband could be severely punished. This book was similar to the medieval *Dzeglisdeba* by King George V the Brilliant. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women were considered independent and legally, economically and politically active persons.

**ARMENIA:** The 18<sup>th</sup> century writer and philosopher and author of the first Armenian Constitution Shahamir Shahamirian talked about gender equality and the equal participation of women in political and social life.

**AZERBAIJAN:** 18<sup>th</sup> century Azerbaijani women's roles were shaped largely by Islamic ideology and patriarchal culture. However, there were courageous women like Tuti Bike of Darband, the wife of Fatali Khan, showing the existence of female labour force replacing men in industry, transportation and agriculture.

### **NORTH CAUCASUS**

**CHECHNYA:** Chechens had a society based on equality between the sexes. Women not only assisted men in defending their auls, but also fought together with men.

### **Questions**

- 1- Why did women's status in society decline over the centuries?
- 2- Why did society in the Caucasus become increasingly stratified in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

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- 9- Yilmaz, H., *National Identities in Soviet Historiography: The Rise of Nations under Stalin*, Routledge, 2015.
- 10- *Gender Attitudes In Azerbaijan: Trends And Challenges*, Azerbaijan Human Development Report, 2007.

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS

**GEORGIA:** Women in Georgia made great contribution to education by increasing literacy. One of the women who was considered to be one of the first feminists in Georgia, Lela Gaprindashvili opened the first school for girls from impoverished families in her apartment in Tbilisi in 1883, which taught sewing and needlecraft. In her *Romani didkhevashi*, *Orena da quche*, *Gurgenaulis babo*, Gaprindashvili dealt with relations between individuals, social customs and morals, and the status of women in Georgian society.

Princess Mariam Jambakur-Orbeliani was a philanthropist and a feminist who became one of the founders of the *Society for the Promotion of Literacy among Georgians*. She was also the head of the *Society of Women Teachers*.



**ARMENIA:** At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Armenian society provided few opportunities for women. Armenian educational institutions made a significant contribution to the development of culture by opening 300 hundred elementary and high schools for girls and boys in Armenia.



**AZERBAIJAN:** Although women's roles were significantly determined by Islamic ideology and traditional, patriarchal Azerbaijani culture which saw women as caregivers in the home in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the political, economic and cultural caveats gave women an incentive to increase their literacy and to join in public life and activities. Schools were opened for girls, like the one in Shamakhi at the house of a wealthy aristocrat, which provided new opportunities for women such as Khurshudbanu Natavan (poet) and Gonchabeyim (poet) to be active in the public life. Natavan also was the founder of the first literary society *Majlisi-Uns (Society of Friends)* in Azerbaijan. Many writers and intellectuals from every region in Azerbaijan joined in her literary society.

### NORTH CAUCASUS

**CHECHNYA:** In Chechnya women often volunteered in defending their auls. They provided help to warriors and fought with men side by side against the enemy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Questions:

1- Why, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were women still treated as second class citizens and denied access to education in some societies?

#### Readings:

- 1- Najafizadeh M., and Mennerick L.A., "Gender and Social Entrepreneurship in Societies in Transition: The Case of Azerbaijan", *Journal of Third World Studies* , FALL, 2003, Vol. 20, No. 2, THIRD WORLD DEVELOPMENTS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (FALL, 2003), pp. 31-48
- 2- Historical Dictionary of Georgia, The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2007.
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- 8- Hovannisian, R. G., "Russian Armenia. A Century of Russian Rule", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas Neue Folge*, Bd. 19, H. 1 (MÄRZ 1971), pp. 31-48.
- 9- Jaimaoukha, A.M., *The Chechens: A Handbook*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS:

**GEORGIA:** At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the national Georgian culture assigned women the role of breadwinner, housekeeper and mother. During the Soviets, most urban women were allowed to work. Top-level political and business jobs were less available for women. Only few could have positions in the military, in the government and in law enforcement. The largest sector of female employment was agriculture. Women began to play more active role in Georgian politics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Between 1995 and 2004, 18 female deputies were elected to the parliament. Women had equal access to education with men.

**ARMENIA:** In April 1917, a document issued by Catholicos Gevorg V urging the Armenian communities to respect the rights of women, their political participation in national affairs and their rights to vote for and to be elected into offices. Besides assigning role of motherhood and housekeeper, the Soviet authorities urged the liberation of women from housework and family life and encouraged women to work in political institutions. In 1990s, women made up 30 percent of the Armenian Supreme Soviet. Few women were allowed to have membership in the Politburo.

**AZERBAIJAN:** With establishment of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan in 1918, women become active members in public life. The Soviets encouraged women to become literate. The Institute of Pre-school education for Women established in 1921. In 1922, the Institute was converted into a Female Teacher-training Institute. In 1923, first women journal *Sharg Gadini* (Oriental Woman) was published in Azerbaijan .



In the 30's, Leyla Mammadbeyova became the first woman pilot and called the "Mistress of the Skies". When Baku Aviation School opened, she was the first woman to enroll in the school.

Women substituted men during the World War II when men went to the front. There were women pilots like Leyla Mamedbeyova and Zuleykha Seyidmamedova, and ship captains like Shovkat Salimova.

After the independence, women's role in the society increased. However, the equal rights of women and the status of women in social and political life was not fully respected.

In 1995, Azerbaijan officially accepted the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW).

Women's empowerment and enhancement of their status in the society was emphasized at the first *Congress of Women of Azerbaijan* on the 25th of September 1998 which was the first women's forum held in Azerbaijan.

## **NORTH CAUCASUS**

**CHECHNYA:** Chechens are patriarchal. But, women are highly respected and valued. During the Soviets, the Russian schools provided basic education for girls, and by 1932 more than 2,250 Chechen girls received education. By the late 1930s, some Chechen women with professional qualifications occupied responsible positions in the government and began to work as doctors, teachers and became party members.

The war in Chechnya had a profound effect on gender roles in Chechen society. When men were at war, women had to act as protectors of their families, and even can take leading roles in society which caused resentment among men.

Chechen women's status was lower, and their choices were much more limited than men. Their behaviour was under close scrutiny by both women and men.

### **Questions:**

1- Although the Soviet authorities urged the liberation of women from housework and family life and encouraged women to join in public life, why was women's status still lower, and their choices were much more limited than men in all the Caucasus states?

### **Readings:**

- 1- Layton, K.S., *Chechens Culture and Society*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
- 2- Gachechiladze, R. "The Social Structure of the Population as a Social Dimension of the Democratic System (the Case Study of the Republic of Georgia)", NATO programme of "Democratic Institutions Fellowship", Department of Human Geography, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia, 1995-1997
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