

IREX 2009 Regional Policy Symposium – Research Summary
Jennifer Solveig Wistrand

Title

Migratory Employment in Post-Soviet Rural Azerbaijan: Changing Traditional Gender Roles and Diminishing Educational Prospects of Females¹

Hypothesis and Objectives

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, strategies for “getting by” in socially, politically and economically unstable and rapidly changing environments have become increasingly important to young Azerbaijanis, particularly girls and young women living in Azerbaijan’s rural regions. Their post-Soviet reality has been diverging, and seems likely to continue to diverge, from their urban and suburban counterparts. A dysfunctional education system disadvantages all students, but especially those who live in the rural regions, and a seasonal migration of rural men to neighboring countries obliges rural women to periodically assume traditional male roles in addition to traditional female ones. The combination of these two societal processes seems to be dissuading many rural girls from pursuing an education and a career, leading them instead to marry and start families earlier than their Soviet-era predecessors did, and earlier than their contemporaries in urban and suburban Azerbaijan. Given this hypothesis, three of the objectives that need to be explored are: How is a dysfunctional education system differentially impacting rural students’ ability and opportunity to pursue educations and careers? How is the seasonal migration of rural men to neighboring countries reshaping traditional gender roles? And what role does traditional Azerbaijani culture play in helping to diminish educational prospects of girls and young women?

¹ Between January 2006 and April 2008 I conducted twenty-two months of field work for my doctoral dissertation in anthropology in Azerbaijan. The focus of my research was young Azerbaijanis’ understanding, interpretation and internalization of citizenship, particularly their sense of belonging to various religious, ethnic and linguistic groups. Since all young Azerbaijanis are required to attend school for at least nine years, and since I was foremost interested in the schools’ influence on the first post-Soviet generation’s conception of citizenship, I selected five different types of schools at which to observe and interact with a variety of students, teachers and directors. Four of the schools were located in or around Baku, while a fifth school was located in a village five hours from Baku. This paper is based upon research conducted during several months spent living in the village in which the fifth school was located.

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Anticipated Impact, Initial Results and Relevance to the Symposium

Prior to Azerbaijan's incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1920, the country lacked a uniform, compulsory education system. For example, some Azerbaijani boys were educated in *madrassas*, or schools that adhered to a strict Islamic curriculum, while some other Azerbaijani boys were educated in *Jadid* schools, or schools that followed a more secular curriculum. Within a decade of being absorbed into the Soviet Union, however, Russian language and Azerbaijani language schools had been established throughout the republic, and all boys and girls, regardless of their religious, ethnic or linguistic affiliation, were attending school for a minimum of nine years. Few of the rural Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke were nostalgic for the Soviet Union, particularly its political system. However, even the more outspoken anti-Soviet members of the village in which I stayed for several months were reluctant to criticize its education system. According to them (and, indeed, according to the majority of the Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke, regardless of their social, political or economic position), the Soviet education system was far superior to the current one for many reasons.

For example, few of the rural teachers whose classes I observed had enough copies of the textbooks they were supposed to be using to distribute individual copies to their students. This forced them to ask two or three students to share one textbook. All Azerbaijani students are required to take the Constitution of Azerbaijan class in the ninth grade. However, the seventy year old civics/constitution/economics teacher who taught at the village school I observed for part of the 2007-2008 academic year had not received any copies of the textbook he was supposed to be using that year from the Ministry of Education in Baku, so he spent each class period dictating passages from an outdated late 1990s version of the textbook to his students instead.

In addition to a lack of textbooks and other basic academic and non-academic resources (such as chalk and reliable electricity), the increasing tendency of urban and suburban teachers to prepare their students to pass the state exams necessary for university entrance with private tutoring, as opposed to traditional classroom teaching, is also disadvantaging rural students. For

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one, few rural teachers have access to the various supplemental materials urban and suburban teachers use to do private tutoring. For another, few rural teachers, the vast majority of whom are female, have time to do private tutoring. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union's centralized economy and the subsequent loss of factory and other jobs in the rural regions, many rural men have been forced to seek seasonal work outside of Azerbaijan, generally selling produce in Russian markets. This has forced many rural wives to periodically assume their husbands' household and other responsibilities, which, in turn, has forced many rural daughters to take on many of their mothers' duties.

For example, while I was conducting field work in a village five hours from Baku, I stayed with a not atypical rural family who, at the time I was staying with them, consisted of a forty year old mother, a twenty-two year old unmarried daughter and a twenty-one year old unmarried daughter. The family's forty year old father was selling his farm's fruit in the markets in Moscow, while the family's eighteen year old son was completing his mandatory military service in western Azerbaijan. Several weeks after I had settled in with the family, the older daughter and the mother had a rather shrill argument over who was responsible for preparing the family's meals: the older daughter or her mother. The older daughter yelled, "*I don't understand, aren't you the wife?!*" The mother yelled back, "*No, I'm not the wife – I'm the husband! Who milks the cows and takes them to pasture and feeds the chickens and cuts the weeds and looks after the fruits and vegetables and then sweeps the yard and makes the bread . . .*" Ultimately, the older daughter prepared dinner while the mother, and two female neighbors, brought the cows home from pasture.

During the course of my stay in this village I heard many such exchanges (most of which were less vociferous) between mothers and daughters, aunts and nieces, older female cousins and younger female cousins, etc, over who was responsible for completing such-and-such a traditional husband/father or traditional wife/mother task. I also heard many mothers lament the fact their daughters could not (or most likely would not be able to) pursue their educations, let alone a

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career, because they were under-prepared to take the state exams to go to a university and their help was needed at home. Indeed, shortly after the older daughter and the mother noted above had ceased arguing and left to complete their respective tasks, the younger daughter told me her sister was upset because she was supposed to go to a university at the end of the month. However, since their father was not home to help with the farm, and since he was the one who currently held, in Moscow, the money from the sale of the farm's produce, a portion of which the older daughter needed to pay to attend a university, the older daughter would have to postpone going to a university until her father returned. It is important to underscore the latter point: as many rural men's economic activities have moved from their villages to neighboring countries, their (and by extension their families') primary sources of income have moved with them. It is not uncommon for many rural families to go months without receiving any money, or an indication of when it might arrive. Ultimately, confronted with these and other challenges, many rural girls are choosing to discontinue their educations (or, in some cases, their families are deciding this for them) and instead marry earlier than they might otherwise have chosen to do.

While economic factors are strongly influencing many rural girls' and young women's decisions to abandon aspirations for an education and a career, some of them told me it was more important for them to marry and raise a family than pursue an education and a career, even if they had the academic ability and the opportunity to do so. In other words, there are some strong cultural reasons, in addition to economic ones, leading fewer rural than urban and suburban girls to pursue an education and a career. Given the Symposium's focus on policy, and the space limitations of this Research Summary, I do not discuss these cultural reasons here.

That said, this research, which directly addresses two of the Symposium's proposed topics of discussion - education reform and economic trends - indicates the need for additional studies of the former Soviet republics' changing education systems' impact on various demographic groups' ability and opportunity to pursue an education. It also suggests the need for

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more in-depth studies of the ways in which the former Soviet republics' rural families' livelihoods have changed since independence.

Relevance to the US Policy Community

The American and European Union governments are trying to help the Azerbaijani government reform its education system with a multi-million dollar World Bank grant to its Ministry of Education to, among other things, rewrite curricula and textbooks. In this context it is necessary to note that rewriting curricula and textbooks will probably not have a meaningful impact on students' academic development until all schools, rural as well as urban and suburban, have received the textbooks for all of their students, as well as other much needed academic and non-academic resources. New curricula and textbooks will also probably have limited impact on students' academic development until the state exams students must take to go to a university actually reflect the textbooks' contents, as opposed to reflecting the contents of the supplemental materials which many urban and suburban, though few rural, teachers have. Additionally, some of the non-governmental organizations operating in Azerbaijan, specifically those whose mission is to address "gender issues", should focus less attention on discussing the philosophy of gender equality and devote more attention to closely related practical issues, such as developing small lending programs for women in rural regions. Many of the rural women with whom I spoke told me their husbands – some of whom are gone for up to eight months of the year - have much greater control over the day-to-day availability of the family's income than they do, since the men are the ones who actually receive it, oftentimes in a foreign city several days by train from the village. As noted above, the inability to pay education-related expenses at critical times can negatively impact girls' and young women's educational prospects.