

# Women's Political Participation in Azerbaijan: Problems and Necessary Steps

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Political participation is the set of activities that citizens carry out in order to influence or support the government and political processes.[\[1\]](#) The participation of citizens in determining their country's political destiny is important for the establishment and consolidation of democratic governance. In this way, governance becomes more transparent and the accountability of institutions increases, which has a positive impact on the strengthening of democracy in the country as a whole.

Under international law, men and women have the right to equal and full participation at all stages of the political process. Goal 5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which concerns gender equality, declares that women and girls have equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities with men and recognizes this as a fundamental human right.[\[2\]](#) However, according to 2025 data from the United Nations, women currently hold the positions of head of state or government in only 29 countries worldwide. Globally, women make up only 22,9 percent of cabinet members, which shows that gender balance at the highest levels of executive power has not yet been achieved. Women's representation in national parliaments stands at 27,2 percent. At the local (municipal) governance level, women account for 35,5 percent of elected representatives across 145 countries. At the current pace, it will take approximately 130 years to achieve equal representation in top executive positions.[\[3\]](#) Therefore, it is essential to eliminate the systemic barriers to women's participation in politics and to strengthen political leadership and reform efforts.[\[4\]](#)

Azerbaijan restored its independence in 1991. The country was shaken particularly by the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Political and economic instability within the country, along with the authoritarian consolidation of a political regime that has remained unchanged since 1993, has led to a decline in citizens' political participation. Although equal representation of women and men in politics was affirmed in the Constitution adopted in 1995, women's active participation in politics remains a serious problem today.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the existing challenges related to women's political participation in Azerbaijan. The research is structured around three main questions: (1) What are the main factors that hinder women's political participation in Azerbaijan? (2) What measures have been implemented so far in the field of women's political participation? (3) What steps are necessary in the future to increase this participation? The main factors hindering women's political participation in Azerbaijan are social and cultural norms (that is gender stereotypes), the country's authoritarian consolidation, and women's economic dependence.

### **Women in Azerbaijani Politics**

The level of women's political participation in Azerbaijan is very low and ineffective. In 2024, women's representation in the Milli Majlis (National Parliament) reached 20,8 percent. In 2025, women's representation in municipalities was 39,34 percent. Women accounted for 29,7 percent of civil servants. However, all members of the Cabinet of Ministers are men. In the Presidential Administration, women holding executive positions are Mehriban Aliyeva (Vice President), Jamila Abbasova (Presidential Assistant) and Farah Aliyeva (Head of the Department for Humanitarian Policy, Diaspora, Multiculturalism, and Religious Issues). According to 2025 statistics, there are no female heads of executive authorities or ministers in Azerbaijan, and there are only six female deputy ministers. According to the Global Gender Gap Index,

Azerbaijan ranked 133rd out of 146 countries in 2024 in terms of political participation. Women's representation in senior positions has fallen to 1,7 percent, which is the lowest level in the region.[\[5\]](#) In Georgia and Armenia, this figure has reached 20 percent. With the exception of the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Affairs, all other committees of the Milli Majlis are chaired by men.[\[6\]](#)

There are a number of factors that hinder women's political activism in Azerbaijan. Let us look at the three main ones.

**Social and cultural norms:** In patriarchal societies such as Azerbaijan, where traditional values prevail, women's political activism is limited by the influence of family roles and stereotypes. Society perceives a woman's place as being in the family and the home, while men are regarded as the main decision-making actors.[\[7\]](#) Social expectations formed from an early age and the portrayal of women as emotional and weak individuals limit their role in political decision-making processes and reinforce gender inequality. In addition, in Azerbaijani society, where the institution of marriage holds strong status, women who are represented in politics are often perceived as individuals who do not take family life seriously enough. Sexist approaches are widespread in Azerbaijani media coverage concerning women.[\[8\]](#) In particular, pro-government media outlets amplify news based on such stereotypes.[\[9\]](#) This reinforces the barriers that weaken women's activity in the political sphere. Media often present women in the context of family and appearance, which overshadows their professional achievements.[\[10\]](#) This strengthens gender stereotypes and leads to the formation of biased attitudes toward women politicians in public consciousness. The Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy also emphasizes the importance of reforms to eliminate these stereotypes in the media.[\[11\]](#)

**Economic barriers:** Women's limited access to financial resources and economic opportunities negatively affects their political activism. According to statistics for 2025, women

make up 50,2 percent of Azerbaijan's population and 48 percent of the employed population.[\[12\]](#) However, women's employment is concentrated mainly in socially oriented sectors, such as education and science, and their work is relatively lower paid compared to men. In 2024, the average monthly nominal salary of women was 791,1 AZN, while this figure was 1159,9 AZN among men.[\[13\]](#) If we also take into account gender-based choices in profession and specialization, we can see that women's economic independence is limited. According to data from UN Women, gender inequality in Azerbaijan remains a structural problem in both the public and private sectors.[\[14\]](#) Women and girls aged 15 and above spend on average 25,4 percent of their daily time on unpaid care and domestic work. This shows that the gender-based division of labor remains persistent and weakens women's opportunities for economic and social participation. In rural areas in particular, women often work without pay in family farms, yet they are classified as self-employed. Because they are engaged in domestic work, they remain outside the formal labor market.[\[15\]](#) Although the abolition in 2022 of bans that prevented women from working in 674 professions was considered a positive step, gender stereotypes and the burden of care within the family still do not reduce women's economic dependence. As a result, their political participation remains weak.[\[16\]](#)

Authoritarian political governance: The increasingly authoritarian political environment, the lack of public trust in the electoral institution, and ongoing political repression create serious risks for women as well as men. These risks include threats, violations of rights and freedoms related to private life, harassment based on sexual discrimination, and manifestations of gender-based violence at the family, societal, and government levels. For example, the public dissemination by the government of intimate videos of female and male political activists and the subsequent public lynching campaigns against them can be cited as an example.[\[17\]](#) In this way, authoritarian political governance

makes women's active and safe participation in politics extremely difficult. Moreover, the current conditions in Azerbaijani prisons and society's attitude toward imprisoned women are highly negative. Women are subjected to greater social stigmatization and public pressure compared to men. In addition, intraparty democracy has not been fully established within political parties. Political parties are often built on management models based on family or personal loyalty relationships, and the same political leaders remain in party leadership positions for long periods. Because intraparty elections are not conducted freely and fairly in accordance with democratic principles, women's opportunities for political advancement remain limited. On the other hand, the existing repressive political environment and authoritarian consolidation in the country, along with legislative changes that have tightened party registration procedures, create serious obstacles to the formation of new and independent political parties.[\[18\]](#) As a result, Azerbaijan's party system has developed as a non-competitive party system. Apart from the ruling New Azerbaijan Party, other parties are allowed to operate only as secondary and controlled licensed parties.[\[19\]](#)

In general, there are 26 political parties in Azerbaijan, and some of them have women's councils.[\[20\]](#) Although one of the main objectives of these councils is to increase women's participation in politics, in most cases they serve to strengthen the party's reputation.[\[21\]](#) In other words, the activities of these bodies focus less on effectively increasing women's political activism and more on expanding the number of female members and female representatives within the party in order to enhance the party's public image.[\[22\]](#) Hence, increasing women's political participation is not a priority for political parties. The main goal becomes expanding the membership base and strengthening the party's image. On the other hand, political parties dominated by men approach issues of national importance from a male

perspective. Even women who are involved in politics defend national and traditional values in their speeches. They place particular emphasis on the role of women within the family and become interested parties in further strengthening men's position in society.[\[23\]](#)

Overall, gender stereotypes, women's economic dependence, and the existing political environment in Azerbaijan function as interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors that affect women's political participation. Gender norms instilled in girls from an early age shape their future career and social role choices in advance. The government uses this normative framework to strengthen its political legitimacy. In particular, the portrayal through pro-government media of democratic values as contrary to national moral values or as foreign influence is a typical example of this strategy. For example, President Ilham Aliyev's statement in defense of traditional gender roles demonstrates that gender-oriented stereotypes continue to persist within the political elite, including at the government level, in Azerbaijan.[\[24\]](#)

### **Measures Taken in the Field of Women's Political Participation and Their Ineffectiveness**

To increase women's political participation in Azerbaijan, several measures have been implemented at the legislative and institutional levels and within the framework of cooperation with international organizations. According to the Constitution, women and men have equal rights before the law and the courts, and gender discrimination is prohibited.[\[25\]](#) Presidential decrees in 1998 and 2000 promote the expansion of women's participation in state bodies and public life, as well as the integration of a gender perspective into state policies.[\[26\]](#) The 2006 Law on Gender Equality states as its main objective the elimination of gender discrimination and the ensuring of gender equality in political parties, non-governmental organizations, and trade unions.[\[27\]](#) The Development Concept *Azerbaijan 2020: Vision for the Future*,

approved in 2012, also envisages the creation of equal opportunities for women and men in the labor market and the promotion of women to leadership positions.[\[28\]](#)

There are institutional mechanisms aimed at increasing women's participation, and the main driving force in this area is state institutions. For example, the main state body on women's issues is the State Committee on Women's Issues, established in 1998, which has operated since 2006 as the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Affairs.[\[29\]](#) Although the purpose of this body is to promote gender equality, its activities are mainly focused on domestic violence. Another body is the Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs established within the Milli Majlis. This committee prepares or reviews draft laws related to the protection of women's and children's rights, the ensuring of gender equality, and domestic violence.[\[30\]](#) Until 2023, Gender Commissions operated in 30 municipalities in Azerbaijan. Their main purpose was to promote a gender sensitive approach in local governance and to prevent cases of gender-based violence, especially in remote areas, and to refer such cases to relevant institutions.[\[31\]](#)

To ensure gender equality, Azerbaijan acceded in 1992 to the United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women.[\[32\]](#) In 1995, it adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women.[\[33\]](#) In the same year, Azerbaijan acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which is considered one of the main international legal instruments for the protection of women's rights, and in 2001 to its Optional Protocol.[\[34\]](#) In 2000, Azerbaijan joined the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, and in 2003 it joined the document of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making.[\[35\]](#)

The activities of the above-mentioned institutions have focused more on domestic issues and have not shown genuine interest in carrying out significant work to increase women's political participation. When we consider the legislative framework, institutional measures, and commitments undertaken before international organizations, as well as the conventions adopted or joined, the measures taken in this field in Azerbaijan are either formal in nature or symbolic steps aimed at preserving the government's international image.

The main factors hindering women's political participation in Azerbaijan are deeply rooted gender stereotypes, the authoritarian political system, and economic dependence. Since 1993, political governance based on the principle of transfer of power from father to son and the dismantling of democratic institutions have resulted in the consolidation of authoritarian rule. The current political regime is not interested in increasing the political participation of citizens, including women. Ongoing political repression and the dismantling of the electoral institution have seriously damaged the political activism of both women and men. The government is not interested in a competitive and free political environment because increased political participation is seen as a direct obstacle to the country's authoritarian consolidation. Repeated amendments to the Constitution and other legislative acts to preserve the government's power, as well as the promotion by the government of patriarchal and gender based stereotypes under the umbrella of national moral values, particularly in matters related to women's rights, are clear examples of this.[\[36\]](#) Under such conditions, the participation of citizens, including women, in public administration cannot be strengthened because this could lead to the establishment of democratic values and ultimately to the weakening and change of the authoritarian regime.

Civil society organizations are important intermediaries between citizens and politicians. They play a crucial role in

establishing democracy in any country by analyzing gaps in existing legislation, submitting proposals to the government or parliament for improvement, promoting citizens' rights and freedoms, and working with local communities in areas where the government falls short. In recent years, however, civil society organizations in Azerbaijan have faced serious pressure and bureaucratic obstacles. Independent NGOs working with foreign grants have been subjected to campaigns labeling them as anti-government, anti-national, or foreign agents.[\[37\]](#) These campaigns create serious barriers to their activities.[\[38\]](#) This in turn negatively affects the active and coordinated work of independent civil society aimed at increasing women's political participation.

## **Conclusion**

Despite quantitative progress in women's political participation in Azerbaijan, serious problems remain in ensuring gender equality in politics. Authoritarian consolidation in the country, the non-democratic political environment, the dismantling of electoral institutions, gender stereotypes, and economic dependence based on gender norms prevent significant progress in this field. Although independent civil society and free media play an important role in this direction, their opportunities are limited and they are subjected to political repression. On the other hand, the passivity of female representatives in the Milli Majlis, the lack of transparency in electoral processes, and the weak provision of gender balance in political parties limit women's access to politics. In order to address these problems, it is necessary to create a free and democratic political environment, that is to democratize governance, to introduce gender quotas in parties, to increase women's leadership opportunities, to promote gender equality in the media, and to strengthen civil society.

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