

WOMEN AND CHARITY IN AZERBAIJAN IN 1850-1920

The research on matters related to the history of charity in Azerbaijan, including the significant role of women in it, dates mostly to the post-communist era. During Soviet times, matters of charity were not on the forum of discussion and were intentionally kept off the inquiry agenda. Mainly, there were



Charity Society of Muslim Women in the Caucasus, Tiflis, 1910

two reasons. Firstly, the idea of society did not include the diversity of social classes, or, in other words, the existence of those in need. The ideal concept of Soviet society advocated the state of affairs, which implied that all individuals being members of it were described as equally rich or indeed arguably as equally poor. Secondly, the charity matter was something that belonged to a bourgeois, an aspect that could reflect some positive qualities of social collaboration among capitalists. This would collide with the vision presented by communists, who were particularly keen on showing the capitalists as solely exploitation oriented individuals, deprived of the feeling of compassion and social justice.

Within modern concepts, charity was indeed one of the significant fields in which women in Azerbaijan were active already in the XIX century, creating their circle of influence and solidarity. This matter had already deep traditional roots in the mentality of all Turkish tribes; it was a vastly practised manifestation of the social balance in the community.

Since the middle ages, the concept of charity existed in Azerbaijan. Though, it has had a different definition and was initially more a manifestation of a pity derived from religious as well as human feelings of compas-

sion. Islam devotes a significant space to charity, raising awareness of the necessity for every believer, who is able to reach a specific financial position to dedicate his means every year to zekât. These religious rules had surely a rather individual character, being applicable to mümins and being left as strictly a matter of conscience for each person; so to speak, a matter between him or her and the God.

After the annexation of Azerbaijani principalities to Russia at the beginning of the XIX century, Russian authorities did not hesitate to create conditions which would allow state institutions to benefit from Azerbaijani philanthropist's intentions to donate their assets to charity, even to the extent that some had found themselves in a position to make donations to schools attended solely by Christian children.(1) Actually, the matter was not regarding the religious background of the beneficiaries, but the overall state policy of the Russian Empire, which was making the existence of Muslim pupils at public schools on the territory of Azerbaijan rather unrealistic. Meanwhile, the attempts of Azerbaijani intellectuals to improve educational conditions of Azerbaijani children would be met by authorities without enthusiasm and even with obstacles.

Nicat Society members in 1906



In time, towards the end of the XIX century, economic and demographic changes in northern Azerbaijan resulted in the emergence of various organizations and social movements. The October Manifesto of 1905 brought an end to unlimited autocracy, initiating an era of constitutional monarchy, allowing simultaneously extensive rights for non Cristian citizens. Legislative improvements created a long-expected environment for changes, which previously were lacking for decades. In its turn, the history of social movements in Azerbaijan exemplifies the process that greatly influenced the development of the society. The organizations evolved in Azerbaijan were of a revolutionary kind in terms of impact on the population.

Emergence of organizations and social movements were determined by the rapid economic development and activity of immensely wealthy oil tycoons such as the top charity figure in Azerbaijan, the father of the nation Haci Zeynalabdin Taghiyev. Rich ethnic diversity of Azerbaijani territories allowed formation and coexistence of various charity movements, addressed certain ethnic groups and social classes, while remarkably triggering the formation of awareness by presenting "good examples" of one to another. From the XIX century on, resistance to the purposeful russification policy pursued by the central government shifted from absolute denial

to the expansion of national and religious schools. Briefly, those were the years when political, social, economic, and cultural life in Azerbaijan underwent transformation in harmony with the history of the world.(2)

"The educated part of the population was undergoing conversion, reconsidering religious and patriarchal principles and gradually substituting them with a certain dose of secular values. Society's attitude regarding philanthropy was witnessing passages from conventional duty towards one's own compatriots, to the will to improve overall social conditions, by getting closer towards comprehensive ideals of social justice."(3)

Activities of the charity societies involving women have been recorded officially and known as performing their deeds in South Caucasus already at the times of the mid-XIX century. Historical documents demonstrate Muslim women's activities since the mid-1850s, when they began to collaborate with Christian women of Russian, Georgian, Armenian, and Polish origin in such societies as St. Ripsime and St. Nina in Tiflis.(4)

Charity units were functioning in such cities as Baku, Irevan, Gence and Shamahi. The Societies in itself were not defined as Muslim, though the number of Azerbaijani women who were united under the auspices of such, had always been considerable and is observed to rise towards the end of the XIX century.



Patron (H.Z. Taghiyev, center), director, teachers and students of the first secular girls' school in the East, Baku, 1905

Zeynalabdin Taghiyev in his office. Baku, 1915

Specifically, in 1865 – 17 Azerbaijani women: Çimnaz Bakihanova, Begim Amirbeyova, Şarabanı Ağabeyova, Govhar ağa Gacar, Hatice Ahverdiyeva, Fatma Asadbeyova to mention just a few were among them. In Irevan, 42 members of St. Ripsime Women Charity Society were Azerbaijani.(5)

Gradually, since the beginning of the XX century as a result of deliberate work of men, organized social activity among Azerbaijani women gained momentum. In consequence, the first charity organization of “Muslim women in the Caucasus” was founded in Tiflis in 1910. Founders and members were Azerbaijani prominent women; Geogar-Mirza Princes Cajar, Bursar Saadet Khanum Gaibova, Khadidja Alibeyova and many more. In Baku, the ladies Taghiyeva-Arablinskaya, Tuganova, and Ashurbeyova were active in this same field.

Archival documents of Baku Municipality dated 1909–1915, feature evidence of shelters for adults. In fact, lists of persons in the records of those shelters demonstrate a considerable number of women. Here another remarkable detail can be traced. The list of shel-

ter seekers does not include any names of Azerbaijani women. In Azerbaijani society, women would remain under care of relative men, which would not obviously mean top conditions for all, yet if left without a male caretaker due to the circumstances of life, Azerbaijani women would stay with relatives.(6)

Sevda Suleymanova and Latifa Aliyeva mention in their research facts of existence of a Muslim Charity Organisation already in 1906. They indicate that the idea of establishment of such an organization by Azerbaijani women “most probably” belongs to Hasan Agayev, one of the prominent intellectuals of Azerbaijan.(7) Due to the political aspect, which any form of collective social activity bears, we consider instrumental introducing charity organizations established by women in the early XX century Azerbaijan.

Baku Muslim Women Charity Society. Established on November the 21st 1914. The tasks of the society encompassed aid to orphans and poor children as well as help to wounded and sick soldiers. The society would organize frequent events and vocational schools

Oil tycoon Musa Naghiyev in his car. Baku, beginning of the 20th century



for girls. The activity of the society concentrated significantly on aiding Turkish soldiers that were captured by the Russian Army during 1914–1918 WWI. Four classes of primary education were functioning at the school, supported by six classes of vocational education. The school would provide education in Azerbaijani language, with lessons of maths, handcrafts, and sewing. The school terminated its activities in March 1918 due to the unstable political situation in Baku, resuming them in 1919. So as to ensure more efficient activity at the school, the government of ADR provided a grant of 30 thousand rubles. The school was highly considered as the institution that influenced the formation of social rights and national identity awareness among Azerbaijani girls.⁽⁸⁾ Society terminated its activities after the April 1920 Bolshevik occupation of Baku.

Society of Aid to Economically Non-Sufficient Students of Baku Aleksandrinski School for Girls.

Established in March 1915. The society would organize cultural events on a regular basis. The particularity of women's charity activities in Muslim Azerbaijan was the fact that theatre and music were permanently present at those gatherings. Girls and young ladies were supported by wealthy women. They would stage theatre and operetta performances, which would provide to beneficiaries of charity organizations culturally vibrant atmosphere.⁽⁹⁾

Society for Defence of Women. Established in March 1902 according to the report of "Kaspi". The organization existed for a few years in a rather conflictual environment, as the beneficiaries of the organization were women with difficult and fractured lives, such as persecuted and prostitutes. Those women were seeking shelter and support out of conditions they found themselves in after encountering nasty behaviour of men. The aim of the organization was made public in November 1901, stating that it will be ensuring: "moral and financial help in a sense of fight with conditions of their lives that accompanied their fall".⁽¹⁰⁾ The society had its own office that would assist in their need to find a job. As stated by Latifa Aliyeva, among the women in need of aid of this organization "as a rule there were no Azerbaijani women", as they were taken care by the closest male relative of the family, such as father in law, brother in law or own father or brothers, uncles etc. The donors of the organization were also women of non-Azerbaijani origin as it can be verified from their surnames, such as: Nesterova, Gelovani, Piteruskaya, Alftan.

Ladies Oil and Industry Society. Aiming to fight for the rights of women.⁽¹¹⁾ In fact the number of working women in that field was considerable and they were in need of security that would give them a certain legal basis to maintain their fundamental rights.

Baku Muslim Charitable Society women members, 1914

Society for Promotion of Professional Education for Women. Awareness brought joint efforts of women with the idea of unification for the sake of better professional education. This would guarantee to women possibilities of finding a job, providing financial independence through professional employment.⁽¹²⁾ Initiation of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 resulted in the establishment of nongovernmental organizations all around the Russian Empire. Such an organization was also established in Azerbaijan. Due to its service to the working class we consider it as a charity.

Ladies Committee of the Red Cross. 1904 was marked by the opening in Baku of the comity of nurses. The organization was founded by Russian women. This committee continued its activity even after the war was over and existed till 1918.

Central House. (Sentrodom) non governmental charity organization founded in 1918 and functioned during years of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Organization would take records of those in need of various kinds of aid, assist in providing order at home and on the streets, and fight contagious diseases.⁽¹⁴⁾ This organization would significantly contribute in providing citizens and balanced support in terms of social existence.

To conclude, the majority of first Muslim organizations were established in Baku, but not earlier than 1905. Interestingly, Russian (1875) and Armenian (1899) organizations were already present in Azerbaijan in the XIX century. Historical documents show the presence of Georgian and Armenian charity societies, schools, the press, and other national and public establishments in the region, while the Azerbaijani population was deprived of such.

The first Azerbaijani Muslim Charity Society statute was approved by Governor General of the Caucasus Viceroy Count Ilarion Vorontsov-Dashkov on October 10, 1905. The founders of the society were such prominent personalities as Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağıyev, Həsən Bəy Zərdabi, Əlimərdan Bəy Topçubaşov, Əhməd Bəy Ağayev, Əli Bəy Hüseynzadə. The purpose of the society's activities was based on providing assistance to the elderly and those who lost their ability to work, as well as supporting pupils and students by providing them with financial aid.⁽¹⁵⁾

"Generally at the end of XIX, beginning of the XX century there were over 30 charity organizations that functioned solely in Baku city".⁽¹⁶⁾ Other cities of Azerbaijan witnessed significant activity of charity organizations namely Gence Muslim Charity Society, Irevan Governorate Muslim Compatriots Society, New Shirvan



Society being societies of various profiles and memberships. The sphere of their deeds encompassed mainly charity support of poor citizens, along with the goal of spreading health of the newborn and education.

In this article, we presented information on charity societies frequented by women in Azerbaijan under the rule of tsarist Russia. Importantly, Azerbaijani Muslim women were members of organizations founded by Christian women, when Muslim population of Russia was denied a right to establish organizations. When such a possibility was granted, Muslim women of Azerbaijan joined members of such charity organizations founded by Muslim men as Baku City and Public School Pupil's Aid Society, Child Mortality Combat Association, "Brother's help" "Qardaş Köməği" Social Movement to mention just a few, along with those founded by women and specifically targeting help and assistance to women, which we introduced above.

Outstandingly, the historical background of charity organizations in Azerbaijan, exemplifies liberty of movement and activities of Azerbaijani women as early as second half of XIX and beginning of XX century. Those facts demonstrate the progressive capacities and goals of Azerbaijani intellectuals at the eve of establishment of the Democratic Republic in Azerbaijan. ✨

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