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Research Article

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Traditional Gender Roles Enacted by Men and Women in Azerbaijani Cinema

Zumrud Jalilova*

This article aims to demonstrate traditional roles and relationships depicted in Azerbaijani films in order to dismantle and address some of the alarming gender attitudes and mind-sets that continue to have a toxic effect on lives of the nation. Nowadays television, radio, and the Internet are major sources of information, and film is inevitably a very powerful form of extremely popular art. People learn from movies and media more than from any other source of information. Therefore, if we want to understand our society and its gender problems, we have to understand the images and stories that people encounter. This article analyzes scenarios with (often disparaging) portrayals of women that contribute to the under-representation of females in positions of leadership and build stereotypical expectations. Scenarios where roles are enacted by males and females showcase men in traditional masculine stereotypes while women tend to be in purely decorative portrayals or in mother roles, which is the ultimate feminine achievement in Azerbaijan. The article provides comparative analysis of widely watched “classic” movies along with modern-day motion pictures directed by young filmmakers in the attempt to bring positive changes. It is the objective of this article to present films directed in different times that distinctly demonstrate the negative impact of traditional gender roles and its molding effect.

Keywords: Traditional gender roles, cinema, media, male gaze, gender stereotypes, honor, women as objects.

Introduction

Movies have an increasingly powerful effect on gender beliefs and attitude development in people of all ages because of the conspicuous high rates of its consumption. It is the message and the messenger. Stereotypical images in movies certainly impact our culture, economy, politics, and national discourse, but most of all they shape children’s brains, relationships, and emotions. Along with advertisements, television shows, video games, and social media, films affect people’s minds and behaviours 24/7.

Therefore, when it comes to representing gender on screen one should be aware of its damage, as it is a deceptive act that can ruin relationships and the

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emotional well-being of people. Telling stories that are similar to those that people experience in real life leads to taught behaviour, subconscious consumption, and memorization of information, attitudes, and reactions—sometimes without questioning them—and subsequently repeating them. In addition, there is more to be explored in the gender-specific content featured in popular culture like music videos, lyrics, and film soundtracks. Biased and sexist media images, videos, and lyrics: all of these together have a profound impact on gender relations, especially in conservative societies where it enables young women and men to act in gender specific roles and ways, which form certain prejudices during their childhood and consequently carry through to adulthood.

Figure 1: Movie poster: A Cloth Peddler, 1945.



Source: Azerbaijan State Translation Center.¹

Azerbaijan as a patriarchal society

“*You cannot be what you cannot see.*” We rely on stories, examples, and leaders or, in the most basic form, *images* to inform us about who we are and what our potential is; without these we are left unaware and unable to be that which we cannot see. Ultimately, people tend to incorporate gender clichés presented in cinema into their own concepts of reality, forming perceptions of themselves and consistently behaving in a manner in that matches stereotyped images that are ubiquitous everywhere.² Television remains the main source of information publicly available and accessible in Azerbaijan. People receive and reflect on the information heard and watched on TV. By briefly investigating the ways in which gender roles are enacted on-screen, I hope to dismantle alarming stereotypical imageries and values that continue to define societal gender beliefs, norms, responsibilities, behaviors, and attitudes. Azerbaijani society is defined by ideas of masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice to sustain a sense of nationhood that upholds to a traditional and—in some of the more conservative parts of the country like the south of Azerbaijan—religious lifestyle. In those

¹ Shirin, Manafov. 10 Nov 2015. The film "Arshin Mal Alan" - 70 years, the story of how Stalin ordered to “surpass the Hollywood”. Azerbaijan State Translation Center (accessed: 19 March 2020).

² Dahlén, Micael / Rosengren, Sara and Edith Smit. 2014. Why the Marketer’s View Matters as Much as the Message: Speaking Down to the Consumer Speaks Badly to a Brand’s image. *Journal of Advertising Research* 54(3), 304-12.

traditional families, men have more influence in all measured decision-making spheres, except in areas with greater female participation, such as taking care of children and the elderly. The society there is crafted with the presumption that mainly men should have the authority to make the decisions and be breadwinners, providing for their families and parents, and women are meant to be wives, mothers, and caretakers.³ These roles are very gender specific and any type of “misconduct” leads to condemning discussions and conflicts within families and society. News media, reports, and research conducted by international organizations like United Population Fund (UNFPA)⁴ frequently show the dire consequences of these gender stereotypes, mentality, and taught behaviors that develop into certain type of interactions and expectations in Azerbaijan, often leading to conflicts, anger issues, sex-selective abortions (son preference), early and child marriages (virginity cult), domestic violence, and honor killings.⁵ It is no surprise that Azerbaijan is a very patriarchal society loyal to its gender specific roles for men and women, considering that in the 120-year-old history of Azerbaijani cinema male and female characters have been presented to the public through men’s lenses and predominantly with their participation. This includes male characters mainly depicted as hyper-masculine individuals in the role of protector, provider and decision-maker, and females as secondary characters in the role of victim, mother, and wife. Men are often pictured as dominant, victorious, and in elevated positions, while women are pictured in more helpless, submissive positions. Messages about “feminine” and “masculine” behaviours are embedded in advertising, media, news, educational materials, and so forth.

Looking at a number of movies screened since the 19th century, only a limited number of movies feature female protagonists and demonstrate their individuality, nature, and concerns. For example, only four films—*Gilanian Girl*, *Sevil*, *Ismat* (*Ismat* is a female name), and *Almaz* (*Almaz* is a female name)—depicted the path of women’s spiritual and political development between 1923 and 1931. It is worth mentioning that films like *Sevil* and *Ismat* were vessels of Soviet propaganda that aimed to unveil and modernize Eastern women, thus spreading the USSR’s colonial power. Soon after becoming part of the Soviet Union, one of the main themes of Azerbaijani cinema was the emancipation of women and the promotion of their rights.⁶ However, soon after gaining its independence, the country became more conservative towards women. If women were previously portrayed as strong and independent individuals without being subjected to patriarchal norms and their particular honor code, later in history they were presented to the public as subordinate wives, daughters, and mothers. Although the male gaze has been dominant in art and subsequently film throughout its whole history, the situation has started changing in the last 30 years, albeit at a very slow pace. Nevertheless, women continue to embody one

³ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and State Committee for Family, Women and Children’s Affairs (SCFWCA). 2018. *Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan: Current Trends and Opportunities. Findings from the Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*. Baku, Azerbaijan, 11-17. (accessed: 15 February 2020).

⁴ UNFPA and SCFWCA, *Gender equality and gender relations in Azerbaijan*, 12-17.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2007. *Gender Attitudes in Azerbaijan: Trends and Challenge*. Azerbaijan Human Development Report (accessed: 15 February 2020).

⁶ Suleymanova, Sevda. *Female Characters in Azerbaijani Cinema*. Baku Research Institute (accessed: 30 April 2020).

of these roles: mother/daughter, wife, innocent love interest, slut (a woman nearby that intentionally or due to certain circumstances has to sleep with other men; interestingly, she usually dies in the end), etc. With that said, I aim to bring to attention some of the roles enacted by men and women in media consumed by the Azerbaijani population that continue to shape and influence the relationship in families, as well as the mind-set and gender attitudes in society at large.

Purity of women and honor of men as vital values

One of the key aspects a girl should act to defend in Azerbaijan is her purity, which along with certain standards of behavior and appearance, also means her physical privacy. As you can see on Figure 1, early marriages and prioritization of protecting the reputation of girls continue to take place in Azerbaijan and damage the lives of young people. To highlight the peculiar and petrifying wedding culture based on the aforementioned values, it is worth mentioning a 14-year-old Lerik girl who was married in August 2018 to her rapist, reportedly to save her own honor and that of her family.⁷ In 2011, UNICEF estimated that about 11 percent of Azerbaijani girls marry before their 18th birthday.⁸

Figure 2: Azerbaijan: Getting Married at 17.



Source: Wallwork, Lucy and Sitara, Ibrahimova. 2018. Azerbaijan: [Getting Married at 17](#). *Chai Khana* (accessed: 19 March 2020).

Azerbaijani media continues to protect the mentality that a woman's body and honor belong to a family (male members) and consequently to the man who will marry her regardless of her age (be it an 18-year-old girl or 40-year-old woman). If a woman leaves the house of her father (*ata evi*) and starts living in a romantic relationship, or if she is divorced, society would slander and stigmatize her, labelling her a slut ("*fahişə*" or "*qəhbə*") and not accepting her as part of the family and treating her as a member. The word is widely used to describe any type of women who dates a man and *dares* to choose him as an intimate partner, especially after being divorced. Parents would oppose such an affair of a son or daughter in the described position, as it would be considered to be dishonoring

⁷ Wallwork, Lucy and Sitara Ibrahimova. 2018. [Azerbaijan: Getting Married at 17](#). *Chai Khana* (accessed: 19 March 2020).

⁸ UNICEF, [Key Demographic Indicators: Azerbaijan](#) (accessed: 30 April 2020).

a family and disrupting its reputation. Film writers and directors develop plots that consist of these life narratives devised and presented in the national film industry, where scripts often include different forms of violence either from the parents or from a man. As an example, one of the most famous movies in the country produced in the 1990's, *Tahmina* directed by Rasim Ojagov, depicts the love affair between Zaur, a man from an affluent family, and Tahmina, a news presenter who is divorced and is doing her best to survive in a conservative society with that social stigma.

Figure 3: Movie scene: *Tahmina*, 1993.



Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

Figure 4. Movie scene: *Tahmina*, 1993.



Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

Zaur's family condemns this romantic relationship and tries to divert him into an arranged marriage with a daughter of a family friend, who they know and

approve. As a result of social pressure, slut-shaming and continuous phone calls from Zaur's mother to Tahmina accusing her of seducing her son eventually form a crack in their relationship. Zaur marries Firangiz under the societal and family pressure, whereas Tahmina dies from heavy drinking. When the couple returns from the honeymoon, Zaur's brother-in-law breaks the news to him. Albeit devastated by the news, the final scene of the movie shows him taking out his wife's grocery list and driving to the market, implying that life goes on and that a woman's life is not as valued if she does not comply with the societal criteria of "purity." The "slut" always dies, even if she is as innocent as Tahmina. This is a classical film trope and one of the signifiers of the male gaze in Azerbaijani culture and film industry. Analyzing the plot of the above-described movie, one can highlight the role of the traditional mentality that prevails: one that values honor and women's purity over everything, even at the cost of their children's happiness or someone else's life. Since the 1990's, the idea of a traditional family model and "purity" of girls has not changed much; on the contrary, the number of suicides keeps growing for the same old reasons: arranged marriages, women's chastity, and societal pressure. On the other hand, some young filmmakers make attempts and efforts to change the discourse by questioning this notion and revealing some of the multiple complex and contradictory ways in which gender roles and expectations are placed and perceived. This trend is also due to high rates of honor killings, divorces, and instances of domestic violence widespread in the country, which recently have been reported by the media and addressed by activists a lot more. More recent movies like *The Curtain* (*Pərdə*, 2016) directed by Emil Guliyev and *Second Bullet* (*İkinci Güllə*, 2017) address the problems of arranged marriages that girls are forced into against their will (often with violence), slut-shaming, and virginity, and are screened in national, local and international cinemas.

Figure 5. Movie poster: The Second Bullet, 2017



Source: Natig Rasul

The very interesting plot of *Second Bullet*, directed by Natig Rasul, takes place in a remote village of Azerbaijan. Weddings in the village cause intrigue and excitement as the virginity of a bride and honor of the family are unveiled to the community. In this case, this is done in a very peculiar way. The long-lasting tradition of the village is arranged to inform everyone on the virginity of the bride by loading the gun with two bullets and shooting into the sky on the night of marriage: two shots in the air means she is a virgin, and one means she is not. The latter would cause trouble in a family, disrupting its reputation and respect. In this movie, the bride turns out to be a virgin, but the groom fails to shoot the second bullet because the gun malfunctions. Misinterpretation of this in the village rapidly leads to false allegations on bride's honor. The bride's father, hearing one shot, decides to kill his daughter with an axe from his garden. Meanwhile, another interesting scenario is shown in the movie when men condemn a prostitute in the village (who they all presumably see from time to time) but in the end seek help from her, despite belittling and disgracing her. She is the person who offers a solution to them: they get a bullet from her, and rush to load the gun that they left on the terrace. The movie finishes unexpectedly when the bride takes the gun and shoots herself with the same second bullet that they failed to fire in the air. Another interesting detail of the film is that we never see or hear the bride. We see her family, the groom, and the villagers, but not her. The only noise she makes is the sound of the bullet when she decides to commit suicide, serving as her voice and a metaphor for the value of young women in the community. She is heard only when she dies as a victim of violence. The director leaves the audience to think about the actions and reactions, false alerts, and gossip that people impose and spread while not knowing or caring about the different underlying reasons behind things, as well as the way it can influence one's life in the most dreadful way. The movie raises the question of the virginity cult preserved and controlled by men in Azerbaijani society, which puts pressure on everyone but most importantly on women, who are trapped in the general presumptions and gender norms that limit their life choices and chances.

It is worth mentioning that the public in Azerbaijan actively discuss and gossip about the private lives of people and intervene in their relationships, but avoid speaking up or acting against domestic violence issues.⁹ Young feminists who arrange peaceful walkouts face brutality and violence from the police, whereas no measures are taken to stop extremely unethical and sexist talks in the media and on TV Programs that spread hatred and justify violence against women. Additionally, the public condemns and criticizes people who proactively protest, especially with the recent walkouts organized to address the issue of domestic violence.¹⁰

In this contradictory context, there is a clear cultural message on gender inequality in Azerbaijan, which is “the personal is not political.” Another great example is the movie from 1981 called *A Closed Door* (*Bağlı Qapı*) also known as *A Woman Behind the Green Door* directed by Rustam Ojagov, which reflects the ignorance of society towards the violence against women. It involves a man who

⁹ Novruzova, Fargana. 2019. [Baku police disperse rally on International Women's Day](#). 11 March 2019. (accessed: 16 June 2020).

¹⁰ OC Media. 2019. [Anti-domestic violence march goes ahead in Baku despite attempts by police to disperse it](#). 21 October 2019. (accessed: 16 June 2020).

just returned home from a mistaken imprisonment and his neighbors. He witnesses violence happening behind the doors of his neighbor and chooses to act. Eventually he gets detained by police for intervening in the family and trying to protect the wife of the abuser. Unexpectedly, all the neighbors come to police station to defend him, as they all understand their mistakes and that he did the right thing to stop the continuous violence against this woman.

Figure 6: Movie scene: A Closed Door, 1981



Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

Figure 7: Collage of the scenes: A Closed Door, 1981



Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

These aggressive depictions of characters and their roles reflect the lifestyle and traditions blindly followed regardless of dire outcomes. Only few Azerbaijani

movies address the issue of violence against women, arranged marriages, and virginity in a challenging manner, as it is still valid and highly controlled by the patriarchy. Virginal obsession and the myth of purity are nothing new, though. Virginity is historically rooted in establishing paternity and is entrenched in male ownership. Gendered portrayals of controlled sexuality, monogamy, and purity in Azerbaijani cinema continue to influence the interactions and behavior between men and women, and the way this narrative is articulated through popular culture has not made much progress.

According to Sevda Sultanova's research, *In the Name of God (Bismillah)* was the first movie that discussed the issue of women's freedom in Azerbaijan back in 1925. Zeynab, one of the main characters, does not reveal the fact that she was raped by a mullah, and then her family forces her to marry another man.¹¹ On the wedding night, when her husband learns that Zeynab is not a virgin, he expels her from his house. Zeynab, while rejected by everybody, is caught by Musavat (a political organization developed into party, currently an opposition party in Azerbaijan) soldiers and is forced into servitude on the plantations. Afterwards she joins her brother Jafar, who is a Bolshevik, in his struggle against the government.¹² At the end of the movie, the sexual assault by the mullah is revealed and he is sentenced to imprisonment, leading to restoration of women's rights in cases of rape after the establishment of the Soviet government.

Figure 8: Movie poster: Bismillah, 1925



Source: Letterboxd.com

¹¹ Kazimzade, Aydin. 1997 *The Pre-Soviet Era: Celebrating 100 Years in Film, Not 80*. *Azerbaijan International* 5(3), 30-35 (accessed: 25 February 2020).

¹² Suleymanova, *Female Characters*.

Women as Objects

Another traditional and linguistic legacy that Azerbaijan continues to sustain and value in the marriage context is the “price” paid for a bride. “Buying a wife” is the way to say a man marries a woman. The word “buy” – “*arvad almaq*” or “*mən səni alıram*” is widely used in the marriage context, which characterizes women as objects and attaches a price tag to them. Objectification is now a well-known notion central to feminist theory. *Ownership* is the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold) and includes the idea of treating a person as an object, which can be seen in well-preserved Azerbaijani traditions.¹³ Moreover, if a woman is not “pure” (a virgin) she is considered a damaged good and her life and reputation in the society consequently do not cost much; there is a feeling of an unfair commercial transaction in the eyes of the “buying” family that is openly displayed and used to justify pressure against and opposition to man’s choice of a partner.

The situation described above is very problematic and becomes obvious when experiencing life in the social world. For example, aiming to quantify a woman’s nature following the above-mentioned mentality in patriarchal societies (like ours, according to Catharine MacKinnon) is highly ambiguous and precarious. MacKinnon believes that similar societies tend to believe that women are submissive and object-like (and men are those who objectify women). This means that one might be convinced that women are by their *nature* submissive and object-like. It should be noted here that following MacKinnon, “men” and “women” refer to gender categories, which are socially (not biologically) defined: one is a woman or a man by virtue of one’s social position.¹⁴ However, the belief that women are naturally submissive and object-like is false, since women have not been *made* to be like that but rather taught.

One of the most famous and most watched Azerbaijani movies, *A Cloth Peddler* (*Arshin Mal Alan*), is based on a comic, romantic operetta written by Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov in 1913 that openly depicts the outdated traditions and restrictions set by the society and aims to ridicule them. The movie is about a young man, Asgar, who is a successful merchant that wishes to marry someone he loves—except tradition does not allow him to choose his own bride. Matchmakers customarily arrange marriages and it is impossible for young men and women to see or glance at each other as the latter are secluded in their homes and never come out unveiled or unaccompanied. Therefore, Asgar wanders from house to house pretending to be a poor peddler who sells fabric in order to meet someone he could fall for and marry. Peddlers were allowed to come in and see women unveiled while they view and choose their fabrics. Eventually, Asgar meets Gulchohre, the beautiful daughter of Sultan bey, who is an impoverished merchant now. Asgar falls in love with her and decides that she is the one he wants to marry. Asgar offers Sultan bey the chance to marry his aunt who is a widow, knowing that he favors her; in exchange, he asks for the father

¹³ Nussbaum, Martha. 1995. Objectification. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24(4), 249–91.

¹⁴ MacKinnon, Catharine. 1987. *Feminism Unmodified*. Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press.

to approve his union with Gulchohre. Sultan bey, feeling disrespected, kicks him out and shouts out behind them that he would never approve the union.

Figure 9: Movie poster: Arshin Mal Alan, 1945.



Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

Gulchohre too falls in love with Asgar, but knows him as a peddler and not a merchant, and knows her father would not allow her to marry a cloth peddler. Gulchohre is upset when her father informs her about the upcoming wedding with another man offered by a matchmaker. She begs her father not to force her into this marriage but he continues to be rigid. Gulchohre decides to commit suicide¹⁵ to avoid this marriage, but Asgar comes in the last minute and reveals his plan of convincing her father to approve their union with the help of his friend who is the matchmaker. Finding out that he is indeed a wealthy man, and also convinced by the matchmaker whom he respects, the father agrees and the two eventually get married.

The operetta was ahead of its time. The author wanted to illustrate the family drama around marriage rules and expectations that are outdated and damaging. The movie includes dialogues and music that feature the importance of men's money and occupation and scenarios showing the secondary role of women who cannot oppose or change anything decided by and between men. Gulchohra's character is an example of thousands of young women, men, boys, and girls forced into arranged marriages across the country.

Another tragic destiny of a woman is depicted in *The Pomegranate Orchard* (*Nar bađı*), a drama directed by Ilgar Najaf in 2017. *The Pomegranate Orchard* features the story of an old man, who lives together with his grandson and daughter-in-law in a decrepit house amidst a huge pomegranate orchard. His son, who has left the family and gone to Russia, returns home again and reopens old wounds by bringing back forgotten bitter memories with his arrival. Despite

that, his family accepts him and tries to build a relationship again.¹⁶ It ends with his son selling the house and leaving again, as he has another family in Russia, and kidnapping the daughter because of his debts. The movie reflects tragic stories and lives of women living in villages and rural areas whose husbands go to Russia to earn money, end up having another family, and sometimes never returning back. This means a woman is left with a child or children and elderly family members to look after. This burden on women also derives from the fact that they are forced to believe in a religious marriage ceremony that is not legally recognized. This is due to a local belief that religious ceremonies with the Quran hold a lot of significance, regardless if an imam (a worship leader of a mosque) is present or not. The use of the Quran in the ceremony appears to give a symbolic value to wedding and make it a legitimate transaction, even though it is not officially registered.¹⁷ As a consequence, this tradition leads to dire consequences for women with children and no source of income like in the case of Sara, the burdened character from *The Pomegranate Orchard*.

Figure 10: Movie poster: *They Whisper but Sometimes the Scream*, 2019.



Source: Visionsdureel.com

A different modern-day picture is the movie directed by Lala Aliyeva called *They Whisper but Sometimes They Scream*. The director elaborates on an idea based on mythology, where a lake is taken as a feminine symbol and a mirror for self-contemplation as well as a chance for revelation. The lake is surrounded by three trees adorned with fabrics woven by women residing in the neighboring Urva village, who come to collect water from the lake and ward off their sorrows by making nature their ally. It shows the life of some women in the village who come to that lake to share their grief, say prayers, and whisper their fears in hope to recover and to find peace and spiritual relief for the troubles they experience. Those troubles are often violence or other abuse in a domestic setting that they would not share or report, but rather tell to the water to keep it safe and secret; hoping that one day, it will absorb their pain. At the conclusion, one can notice a shift in the storytelling approach: the women are not playing secondary or passive roles but rather let their voices and troubles to be heard. It is also crucial to highlight the visions and approaches of modern filmmakers who do not use satiric but rather tragic imageries and scenarios to

¹⁶Laman, Ismayilova. 2017. [Azerbaijan sends "Pomegranate Orchard" to Oscar](#). *Azernews*, 18 August 2017 (accessed: 25 April 2020).

¹⁷ Wallwork and Ibrahimova, *Azerbaijan: Getting Married at 17*.

reflect on the gender issues in Azerbaijan and to shake the foundations of these gender beliefs and norms.

Maternal and Paternal Images in the Cinema

One of the most powerful symbols that resonates across religious, nationalist, and popular discourses within the Azerbaijani context is that of motherhood. In addition to the ideology of purity, decorative roles, and compulsory heterosexuality, Azerbaijani cinema and television presents gender through images of sanctity symbolized by mother figures and the respected rigidity symbolized by father figures. The latter are presented in films as rational figures who are often grumpy, serious, and hard to please. A father has to act as a head of the family and provide for it. A mother on the other hand has to be sacrificing and emotional and make sure that everyone is fed. Analyzing parental gender division in Azerbaijani families, one can notice the model where women enact the role of homemaker and peacemaker, and men enact the role of provider and decision-maker.

In those traditional families, men have more influence in all measured decision-making spheres except in child rearing, because it is considered a mother's job as she is naturally expected to be a caretaker. Motherhood is considered the ultimate sacred role of a woman and her predominant function in society, compared to fatherhood, which is not publicly assessed, measured, or valued as much. This presently results in many dire consequences for all members of society, only benefitting and feeding the ego of old-fashioned people who use the mentality as an excuse to demonstrate their power and control over people's lives and freedoms. International Women's Day is also another time to celebrate a "womanhood" in Azerbaijan, highlighting her reproductive function and duty in front of the public and government, harshly neglecting infertile women and men, people with health issues, gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and women past menopause.¹⁸

A consequential policy of such division is the parental leave policy. Fathers in Azerbaijan can take only fourteen days of unpaid paternity leave, whereas mothers are privileged to take three years of maternity leave. Consequently, men are taught and expected to be only helpers when they choose to take care of their own child. Presenting it as a privilege and positive discrimination against men, the government sustains the harmful traditions and gender specific roles that hinder the country's development and encroaches on freedom of choice. This gender blind policy leaves women and men in vulnerable positions, with women often being denied work opportunities and career growth as well as no maternity benefits, and men not experiencing early fatherhood and committing to it.

¹⁸ N.N. Kapital Bank. 2018. 8th of March – International Women's Day (8 Mart - Beynəlxalq Qadınlar günü). *YouTube*, 6 March 2018 (accessed: 30 April 2020).

Figure 10: Movie scene: Where is Ahmad? 1963.



Source: Azerikino.com

With both genders experiencing different types of pressure in patriarchal society, they also demonstrate a different type of power within the family. Within Azerbaijani patriarchal and familial context, women have varying degrees of power depending on the relationship role in which they are positioned and if they are a mother to a son or sons. Azerbaijani women are revered and are awarded much power as mothers, in contrast to being wives, where they are positioned as subordinate and subservient. A common phrase such as “I want seven sons and only one daughter, a bride” is an example of social norms related to higher male authority and female obedience that strongly correlate with multiple forms of gender-based violence, including sex-selective abortion.¹⁹ The most recent report on this, *Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan: Current Trends and Opportunities* by the UNFPA, show the results of a survey where male and female respondents were able to provide explanations for those who choose to have a sex-selective abortion. According to respondents, “the girl would be a heavy load to bear for the family” and “the girl cannot stand on her feet freely; she is not independent.” They also mentioned that “every man wants the firstborn to be a boy” and “in some cases daughters grow up to be promiscuous.”²⁰ As a result, both the state and UNFPA reports show an alarming sex ratio of 116–114 boys to 100 girls in 2014–2017.²¹ The high ratio of male to female births is indicative of sex selection that is biased against female births. Another common phrase, “paradise is under mothers’ feet” (“*Cənnət anaların ayaqları altındadır*”) indicates the respect people pay to a mother’s role in one’s life, a sort of pressure put on women used to remind them that they can earn and deserve it only by becoming a mother. To better illustrate: women are portrayed as sacrificing and caring mothers. These interpretations confirm that although Azerbaijani cinema portrays women as self-sacrificing, they also figure as “indestructible when it comes to protecting” their children, particularly sons. A movie from 1963, *Where is Ahmad?* (“*Əhməd haradadır?*”), includes a scene

¹⁹ N.N., Ibrahimova, Sitara. 2013. [A Boy is OK, a Girl is NOT](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...). YouTube, 7 July 2013 (accessed: 15 February 2020).

²⁰ UNFPA, *Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan*, 53-54.

²¹ UNFPA and UNDP. 2015. *Population Situation Analysis: Beyond the Demographic Transition in Azerbaijan* (accessed: 20 February 2020).

where Ahmad's (the son's) mother stands up to her husband and shouts that "Ahmad's mother is not dead so that you can hit him!" which means she is there to protect him as long as she is alive and would not let anyone hurt him. The movie has an interesting plot; it involves Ahmad and Leyla, a couple who attempt to oppose the old traditions and customs and run away from home to avoid the arranged marriages that their parents offer. Along the way, they meet each other and fall in love, and it turns out that their parents initially planned to arrange the marriage between these very two. The movie demonstrates the power division between husband and wife and illustrates the protest of young people against the pressure and control of the family and society.

In Azerbaijani media, women are portrayed as both supplicants in a male-dominated world and as powerful and deified mother figures. Such paradoxical positioning of the feminine provides one source for the ambivalences and contradictions around Azerbaijani womanhood. Several prominent Azerbaijani films narrate this ambivalence.

Similar interpretations of gender in relation to images of nationhood resonate across other movies. For these narrators, gender becomes an important site for cultural difference. Shame, patience, sexual loyalty, and even deference are presented as signifying the "Azerbaijan-ness" of Azerbaijani women. This difference is marked primarily through the control of sexuality and the construction of the pure/chaste woman. Commercial Azerbaijani cinema has also been a masculine domain, which inevitably promoted the depiction of women as objects instead of subjects. In other words, women were primarily seen as "decorative characters" based on their ability to function as objects of male desire, fantasy, and business.

Conclusions

Azerbaijani media is a crucial site for exploring how gender division and roles are communicatively constituted. While doing my research I came across only two articles that describe women's roles and issues in the national cinema: Alia Dadashova's "From a Prostitute to a Stepmother" (*Fahişədən ögey anaya qədər*),²² and Sevda Suleymanova's "Female Characters in Azerbaijani Cinema" (*Azərbaycan kinosunda qadın obrazı*).²³ This also demonstrates a very low interest of the public in female characters, roles, and their concerns.

In this article, I examined famous movies that have echoed in modern society for years in which women are implicated in discourses of motherhood and virginity and men in discourses of guardianship and authority as head of the family. I attempted to unpack some of the contestations and contradictions inherent in the representations and portrayals of Azerbaijani womanhood and manhood in relation to the maternal-feminine, sexuality, and the ideal-masculine. My involvement with researching cinema, gender, and media in society emerges in relation to both my ambivalent consumption of Azerbaijani media and a conscious, reflective recognition of its centrality in constituting subjectivities in

²² Dadashova, Aliye. 2013. *From Prostitute to Mother-in-law (Fahişədən ögey anaya qədər)*. *Kulis.az*, 29 July 2013 (accessed: 2 March 2020).

²³ Suleymanova, *Female Characters in Azerbaijani Cinema*.

our community. As the title states, this paper explores how the feminine and masculine are construed as I outline their roles, and uses this framing to convey the multiple layers of rampant sexism and patronage as well as strictly defined hyper-masculinity.

Screening movies and organizing public events on social and political aspects of gender imbalance and issues should raise important questions. However, simply hoping that these movies and images will hold people back from treating girls and women in a barbarian way is not effective on its own without laws and implementation in place. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (12 November 1995) prohibits discrimination based on sex and states that “the rights of husband and wife are equal,” and after signing the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Azerbaijan passed a Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men in 2006. This action set the legal foundation for gender equality. In 2010, Azerbaijan passed a Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence.²⁴ Despite some of the policy and efforts on the legal level, implementation of the laws has been poor, and mechanisms and services are not well developed and effective. Nevertheless, with the active participation and support from the international organizations among others such as the European Union, the United Nations, the German Corporation for International Cooperation, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Asian Development Bank, Azerbaijan is slowly taking steps towards positive changes.

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²⁴ Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence (2010). Unofficial translation OSCE Office in Baku (accessed: 30 April 2020).

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