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# FIRST SECULAR SCHOOL FOR WOMEN IN THE MUSLIM EAST

THE HISTORY OF AZERBAIJAN HAS WITNESSED MANY EVENTS THANKS TO WHICH OUR COUNTRY TAKES FIRST PLACE IN CERTAIN AREAS IN THE WORLD. THESE COULD INCLUDE THE DRILLING OF THE WORLD'S FIRST OIL WELL, THE FIRST OPERA IN THE EAST AND THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC IN THE MUSLIM WORLD. AMONG THEM, THE FIRST SECULAR SCHOOL FOR GIRLS IN THE MUSLIM EAST, WHICH OPENED IN BAKU IN 1901, HAS A SPECIAL PLACE. THE APPEARANCE OF THE SCHOOL COINCIDED WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW CULTURE IN AZERBAIJAN, WHICH COMBINED ELEMENTS OF TRADITIONAL MUSLIM AND ADVANCED EUROPEAN CIVILIZATIONS. AN IMPORTANT FEATURE OF THE INNOVATION WAS THE GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION OF VIEWS ON THE STATE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND IN GENERAL, ON THE POSITION OF THE AZERBAIJANI WOMAN IN SOCIETY.

*The building of the women's school on the opening date. 1901, National Museum of History of Azerbaijan*



*The Board of Trustees, teachers and students of the school. Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev is in the center in a black suit and headmistress H. Malikova is near him. 1901, NMHA*



The high status of the woman in the social environment in antiquity is confirmed by numerous female figurines symbolizing fertility, which were discovered during archaeological excavations in Azerbaijan. The folk epics of the pre-Islamic era testify to special respect for women and their participation, along with men, in the military business. The inclusion of Azerbaijan in the area of the general Muslim civilization and the establishment of Islamic values and traditions caused the appropriate attitude towards the woman. The words of the Prophet Muhammad that «paradise is under the feet of your mother» certainly confirm great respect for and trust in the woman in Islam. Although from a legal point of view, the man in the Muslim world was given advantage, this did not stop the woman from occupying a special place in society. In many areas of life she had equal rights with men, including in the right to education.

Due to the requirements of the Islamic religion that all of its followers should be able to read and understand the Koran, primary education as minimum, including among women, flourished in all Muslim countries. The history of the Muslim peoples, including Azerbaijanis, has retained the names of many women leaders, public figures, scientists and poets famed for their erudition and wisdom. This fundamentally rejects the arguments of a number of non-Muslim theologians and social scientists that Islam allegedly regards the woman as a lower being designed to serve the men as a rough toy for whims and amusements. The argument that religion restricts the right of the Muslim woman to education - an argument

that was often used by some of the most conservative Muslim clergy – does not stand criticism either.

Another issue is how women's education among Muslims was adequate to the requirements of the rapidly changing times? It should be recognized that **in the 19<sup>th</sup> century education for women in Muslim countries, including in Azerbaijan, did not meet the trends of the era**. The traditional system, under which young Azerbaijani women studied the basics of religion and the rules of housekeeping in maktabs, madrasas or at home, had outlived its usefulness. There was a need to carry out radical reform at girls' schools and give them a more progressive secular nature. Representatives of the progressive public called louder and louder for the expansion of women's education and the involvement of Azerbaijani women in public life. The emancipation of women was seen by them as a movement towards familiarization with progress and civilization. The welfare and education of the people were linked to the liberation of women.

In 1896, the idea was born to open a secular school for Azerbaijani women, which was realized by the great son of the Azerbaijani people Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev. It was Tagiyev whom, as an indisputable authority among Muslims, as a man of advanced views and as a person generous with regard to the educational needs of the people, the director of public schools in the Baku province and the Dagestan region, A. S. Tkhorzhevskiy, addressed with a proposal to establish a college for Muslim girls in Baku in honor of the coronation of Emperor Nicholas II

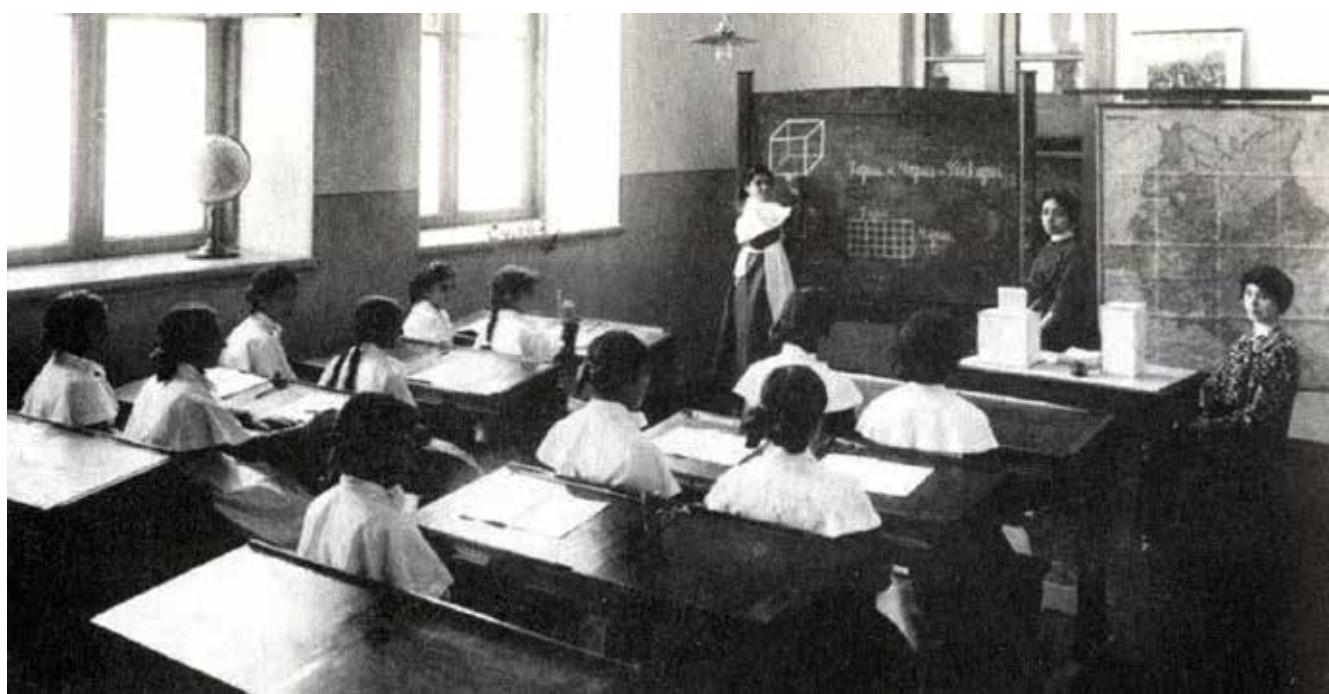


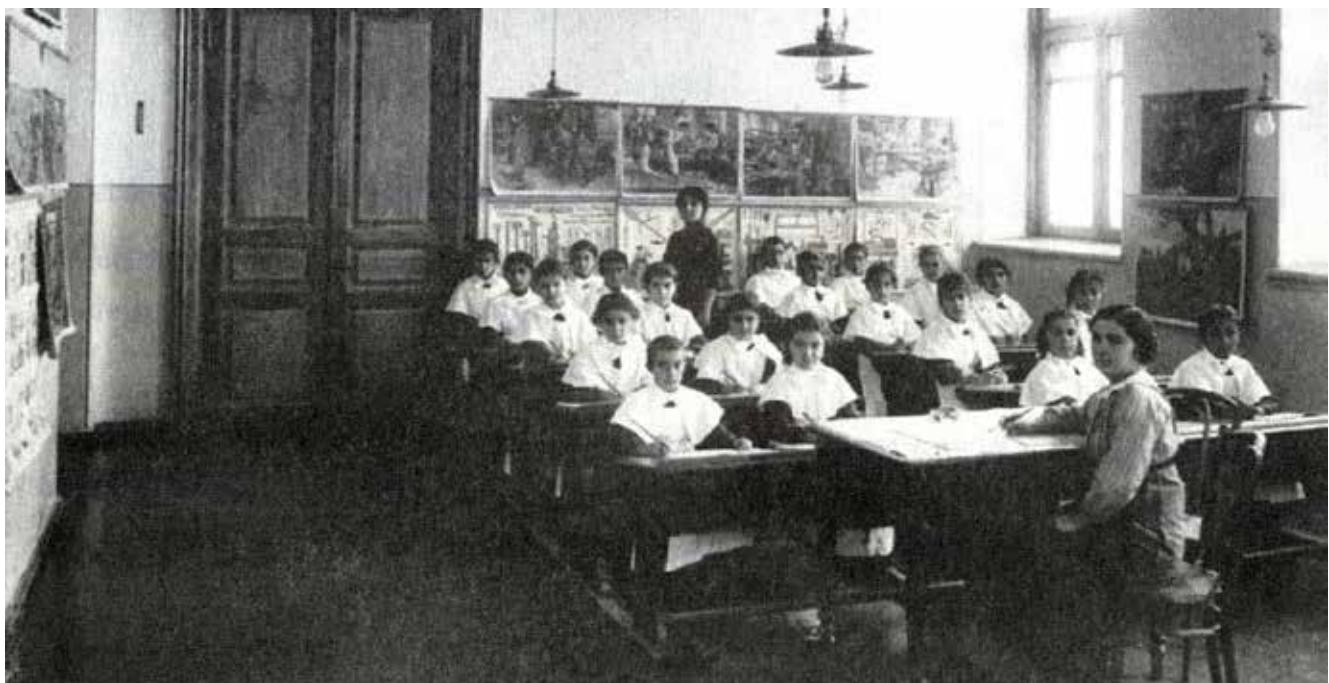
(1). The reply to A. S. Tkhorzhevskiy's letter was not long in coming. A month later – on 24 April 1896, G. Z. Tagiyev turned to the trustee of the Caucasus Educational District, K. P. Yanovskiy, with a statement on readiness to establish a secular Russian-Muslim women's college at his own expense. He pledged to donate 25,000 rubles for the construction of the school building and deposit 125,000

*Classroom. 1901, NMHA*

*School teachers: from left to right - G. Akhriyeva, M. Gimbitskaya, Sh. Shabanova, A. Shakhtakhtinskaya, G. Gaziyeva, N. Narimanova. 1901, NMHA*

in a bank as a reserve stock, the interest from which will ensure the running costs of the institution. Haji described in detail how he saw the organizational structure and the learning process in the school and raised the question of the compulsory teaching of the Azerbaijani language





here. The content of the letter shows that H. Z. Tagiyev was deeply imbued with the idea of opening the first secular Muslim women's educational institution in Azerbaijan and in the whole of Russia and outlined its future structure in details (2).

But despite K. P. Yanovskiy's agreement with Tagiyev's plan, the opening of the school was delayed for several years. Given that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Azerbaijani society perceived the question of women's education ambiguously, this issue required great care and subtlety. In one of his letters, Tagiyev wrote: «... I, as a native of this region, know Muslim family life and all its flaws perfectly well **for in order to gradually lead the Muslim woman out of the closed fanatical life, in which she is now, the only way is school and school again.** But this school has to be created and furnished so skillfully that Muslims treat it sympathetically without any ulterior motives and send their daughters there with complete credulity» (3). Numerous facts show with what difficulty Tagiyev, his associates and members of the progressive clergy had to convince the reactionary clergy and ignorant masses of the need to open a school and of the fact that the Islamic religion does not forbid girls from attending school. According to contemporaries' memoirs, Tagiyev even cried in frustration when he failed to convince his compatriots of the need to educate Muslim girls. «Teach your daughters, why don't you teach them? Look. Among the girl students there are no Baku children. Teach your daughters. In the future they will be mothers and they

will be able to raise their children. What children can you expect from an ignorant mother?» he appealed to the people (4).

Tagiyev faced opposition not only from his countrymen. Obstacles were caused by government circles too. The issue of opening the school was a subject of lengthy discussions and exchanges at the highest level. Russian Minister of Education I. D. Delyanov was dissatisfied with the provision in the draft charter of the school that it may be reorganized into a progymnasium, i.e. a secondary school in the future. The point of the project providing for the inclusion of three Azerbaijanis into the Board of Trustees - members of the Baku City Duma – was criticized. Meanwhile, Tagiyev and officials of the tsarist administration were at loggerheads about the regulations and structure of the women's school. A. S. Tkhorzhevskiy even admitted that his «protests led to nothing because Tagiyev, supported by his numerous advisers, insisted on his own, and I had to accept the additions he had made ...» (5). Tagiyev also had to make some concessions. In the end, on 16 May 1898, the charter of the school was approved, and on 24 May the permission of the Empress to give her name to the institution of education was received. Thus, the process of creating the Baku women's Russian-Muslim school named after Empress Alexandra Fedorovna, which was established with the capital donated by Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev, gained a legal basis and entered a critical stage of implementation.



**Needlework lesson. 1901, NMHA**

In June 1898, the construction of the building of the women's college began. As was mentioned above, Tagiyev pledged to donate 25,000 rubles for construction, but the costs required additional funds. The total amount of Haji's donations amounted to 308,500 rubles, including 183,500 for construction work. As recognized by Tagiyev himself, he did not intend to establish a small school and it had to fully correspond to its purpose.

The building was erected on the main street of Baku - Nikolayevskaya (now Istiglaliyyat). The main architect of the building was a prominent architect of Polish origin, Jozef Goslawski. Skillfully using the national-romantic tradition of Azerbaijani architecture, he created a plastic and colorful work of art.

An important challenge faced by the founder of the women's college was the formation of the Trusteeship Council. The special social significance of the new school required the selection, on the one hand, of authoritative people and on the other, of people really sympathizing with the cause of education. And if the charter clearly prescribed that the members of the Board of Trustees shall be the mayor, provincial cadi, Tagiyev's wife, the headmistress of the girls' school, the director of the men's gymnasium, and a representative of the Baku-Dagestan

Direktorate of Public Schools, the selection of three members of the Council - Azerbaijanis - depended on the City Council and Tagiyev himself. Elected to these positions, Hasan bay Zardabi, Farrukh bay Vazirov and Alimardan bay Topchubashov played a big role in the further activities of the girls' school.

In 1901, the formation of the student and teaching staff began. The school accepted Muslim girls older than 7 years (subsequently - 8 years). Originally it was planned to accept 50 pupils, of whom 20 poor Muslim women studied and lived in the school hostel with the sponsorship of Tagiyev and 30 at their own expense. However, the number of those wishing to enter for free education was higher. Despite the lack of vacancies, the Board of Trustees decided to accept another 13 poor girls at the request of Tagiyev. By the time the women's college opened, the number of students receiving free education had risen to 35, while the total number of entrants was 58. Thus, contrary to the earlier plan, the number of students studying free of charge exceeded the number of those studying at their own expense. Pupils came from Shusha, Tiflis, the North Caucasus and Baku (6).

The most difficult thing was the selection of teaching staff. The Board of Trustees and personally Tagiyev selected candidates very carefully. Teachers were

recruited from female graduates of secondary schools, as well as those who sat a special exam for the right to teach the Azerbaijani language and the Muslim faith. As a result, the first composition of teachers included Hanifa khanum Malikova (Zardabi), Maryam khanum Sulkevich, Asmat khanum Mammad Amin Afandi gizi and Sakina khanum Akhundova.

On 7 October 1901 at noon, the grand opening of the Empress Alexandra Fedorovna Baku women's Russian-Muslim school was held. Kaspi newspaper described the event as follows: «**The seventh day of October will be memorable for our Muslims as a day that marked the real implementation of the idea of women's education, which has long been nurtured by the best part of the Muslim society of the Transcaucasia**, and not only Transcaucasia, but all regions of Russia with a Muslim population, for whom the issue of women's education is one of the pressing questions of life. This alone makes today's celebration in Baku an all-Muslim event to which to all Russian Muslims must respond» (7). At the ceremony, congratulations were expressed by representatives of the Muslim and Orthodox clergy and the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, and congratulatory addresses from Tiflis and Kazan were read out. Along with the recognition of the great historical significance of the honorable event, they all emphasized the role of Haji

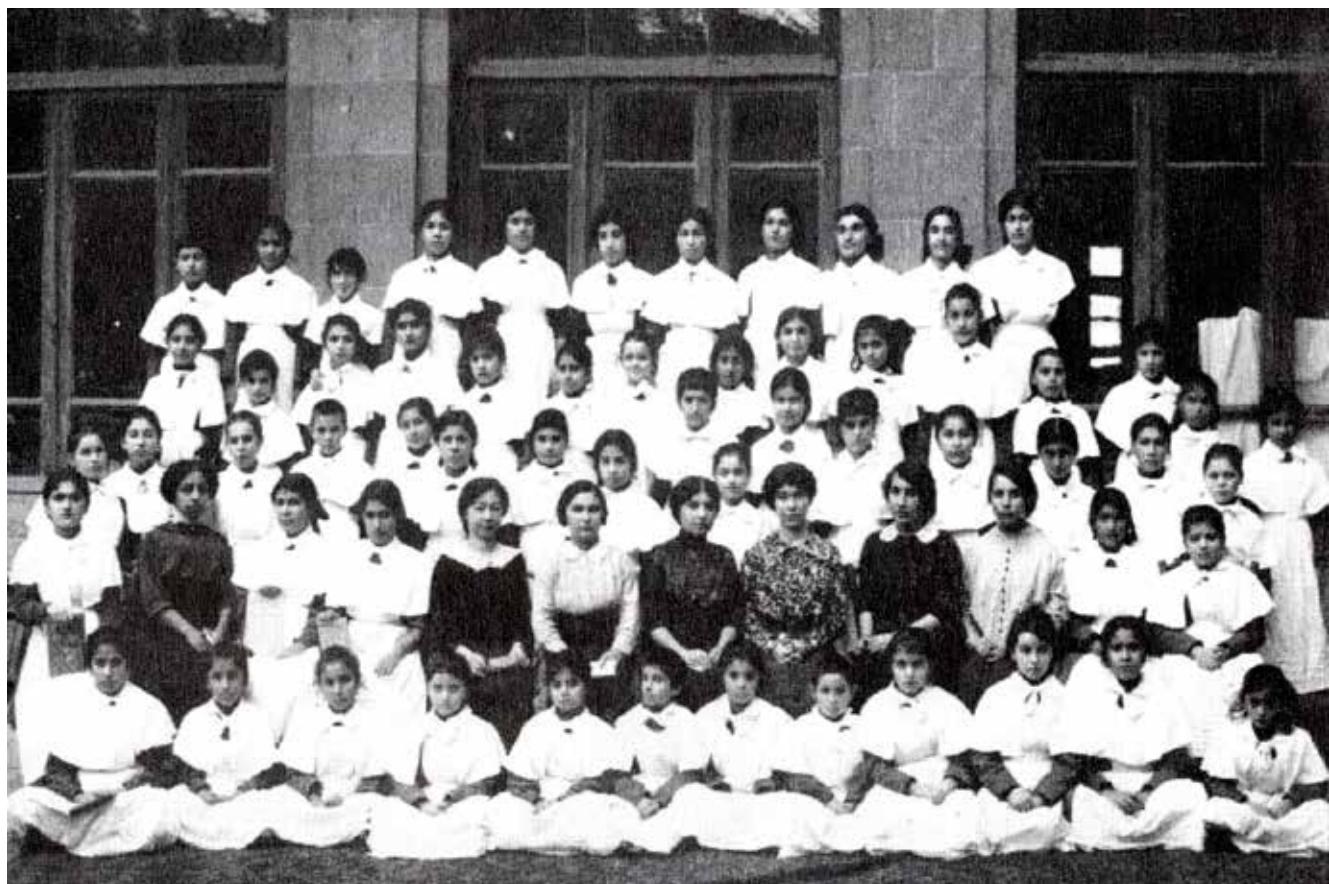
Zeynalabdin Tagiyev, who committed a «new exploit for the benefit of the enlightenment of Muslims.» Justifying this assessment, Haji announced at a ceremony the idea, which did not leave him for a long time: «Today's celebration is just the beginning of an extensive plan. You can see the top floor of the building: it was built by me this way in order to make it easier to build another floor on it. I will do this as this school should turn into a women's school for Muslim girls. It's now my dream.» (8).

The Alexandra Russian-Muslim women's school was a boarding school. Any access by men was banned. Students were totally provided with uniforms, food and manuals by Tagiyev. Along with general subjects, the school conducted workshops on handicrafts and housekeeping. The school had all conditions for the long stay of students, including a hospital, kitchen, laundry, shower rooms and sanitary services. It had a special staff physician and nurse, and the health of the boarders was under regular supervision.

In addition to spacious, bright classrooms, cozy bedrooms and dining rooms, Tagiyev's school had a great stage on which the works of Azerbaijani classics were produced. In general, it should be noted that special attention was paid to the aesthetic education of girls in the school. They were regularly taken to performances at

*Hall for presentations. 1901, NMHA*





*Teachers and students of the school. 1901, NMHA*

Tagiyev's theater and to the cinema, and the school had a choir and literary and dance circles.

The press of those years and high-ranking representatives of the tsarist administration, who were closely familiar with the school, highly valued the educational process here. Indeed, **the school was a genuine specimen of secular education for women**, skillfully combining Muslim traditions with European modernism. Of course, the primary credit for this belongs to the founder and trustee of the college – Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev. But of course, he could not carry this burden alone. Tagiyev rallied the best intellectuals of Baku and progressive religious figures. Among them, Zardabi is particularly noteworthy – he compiled the charter of the school, helped to acquire equipment for the school and accommodated students who arrived in Baku from other places and expected the college to open. The inspector of the Baku-Dagestan Directorate, Soltan Majid Ganizadeh, took constant care of the school. Sheikh ul-Islam Akhund Abdussalam Akhundzadeh, Mufti Mirza Huseyn Afandi Gaibov, Baku cadi Haji Molla Javad Akhund Muhammad Alizadeh, Akhund Mirza Abuturab and other clerics

promoted the idea of women's education among the people with their speeches and publications in the press.

Tagiyev's close associate was his spouse Sona khanum - deputy chairperson of the Board of Trustees. Later, along with Haji, she was an honorary trustee of the school. In 1915, she became one of the founders and chairperson of the society to assist poor students of the Alexandra school. School teachers Rahila Teregulova (Hajibababayova), Saida Sheykhzadeh, Sara Vazirova, Nabat Narimanova, Maryam Gimbitskaya, Govhar Gaziyeva and many others treated the issue with great responsibility and, most importantly, with love. Some of them received their first teaching experience precisely at the Alexandra school, and some were graduates of their native school. The headmistresses of the school in different years were Hanifa Malikova, Maryam Sulkevich, Gulbahar Akhriyeva, Adil Shakhtakhtinskaya and Salima Yagubova. **Most of all these teachers subsequently continued teaching at secondary and higher educational institutions of Azerbaijan.**

The social and political events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century affected the work of the women's school. In connection with the beginning of World War I, there appeared difficulties with the arrival of nonresident students and



*Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev's emblem decorated all material objects belonging to the famous petroindustrialist and patron.*

delivery of food. Tagiyev repeatedly appealed to the Baku-Dagestan Directorate of Public Schools to allow students to leave before the appointed time. Because of the decline in the number of students and teachers, the beginning of classes was often postponed. On 2 May 1917, the Board of Trustees decided to close the school from September 1917 (due to the difficulty with the delivery of food products) (9).

The Alexandra women's college actually ceased operations in early 1918. This period is written in the history of Azerbaijan as the most dramatic and bloody time. The March genocide of Azerbaijani civilians

committed by the Bolsheviks and the Dashnaks in Baku led to the closure of the school.

With the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in May 1918, stability was established in the country. Despite the fact that the school did not work anymore, it made its symbolic contribution to the annals of the history of independent Azerbaijan. It is the building on Nikolayevskaya Street that was the place where the ADR parliament opened on 7 December 1918.

In 1924, Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev – the founder of the Russian-Muslim women's college and pioneer of women's education in Azerbaijan - died. 28 years before his death, requesting the establishment of the school, he said: «**We must lead Muslims to realize their human rights through school education.**» Years passed, and women's education became common in the Eastern world, coeducation of boys and girls appeared, and educated women became actively involved in public life, along with men. Azerbaijan was the first (even among some European countries) country in the East to give women the right to vote. Tagiyev was not fated to see much of this. But the daughter of the benefactor, Sarah khanum, wrote that grateful descendants remember, and will always remember, that it was Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev who «gave the people of Azerbaijan an educated mother and nurtured the first women intellectuals and that **Azerbaijan was the starting point and gave an impetus to the promotion of women's education**» (10).

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