

# Multiculturalism, Islam, and the Perception and the Role of Women: The Azerbaijani Experience

**M**ulticulturalism is a complex phenomenon which is grasped by people differently in the modern world. On the one hand, the leaders of Germany, Britain, and France in 2010-2011 declared that multiculturalism had failed in their countries<sup>1</sup>. There is an opinion that it failed due to several factors – the promotion of various policies by these states which have led to segregating effects, communal violence and crimes, economic disparities, the rise of rightwing populism, etc. However, according to John Bowen, “blaming multiculturalism may be politically useful because of its populist appeal, but it is also politically dangerous because it attacks “an enemy within”: Islam and Muslims. Moreover, it misreads history”<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, others believe that promoted by multiculturalism diversity is in and of itself a positive force, because it offers numerous benefits. Multiculturalism fosters inclusivity and promotes the coexistence of diverse cultures, religions, and ethnic groups within a single society and, thus, it “creates pathways of opportunity and future progress for all members, irrespective of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds”<sup>3</sup>.

Within this context, the issue of women’s status and especially the perception of women from Muslim countries or Muslim women themselves in secular and Christian societies often becomes a subject of intense debate and unfounded criticism.



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In fact, today Muslim women continue to face harassment and discrimination in Western society. They “suffer from the same inequalities as other women (access to employment, gender pay, sticky floor/glass ceiling, domestic, verbal and physical violence, etc.) but additional factors such as perceived religion or ethnicity deepen these preliminary gender gaps”<sup>4</sup>. They stand at a powerful intersection – between tradition and progress, between cultural identity and personal autonomy, between how they are seen and who they really are.

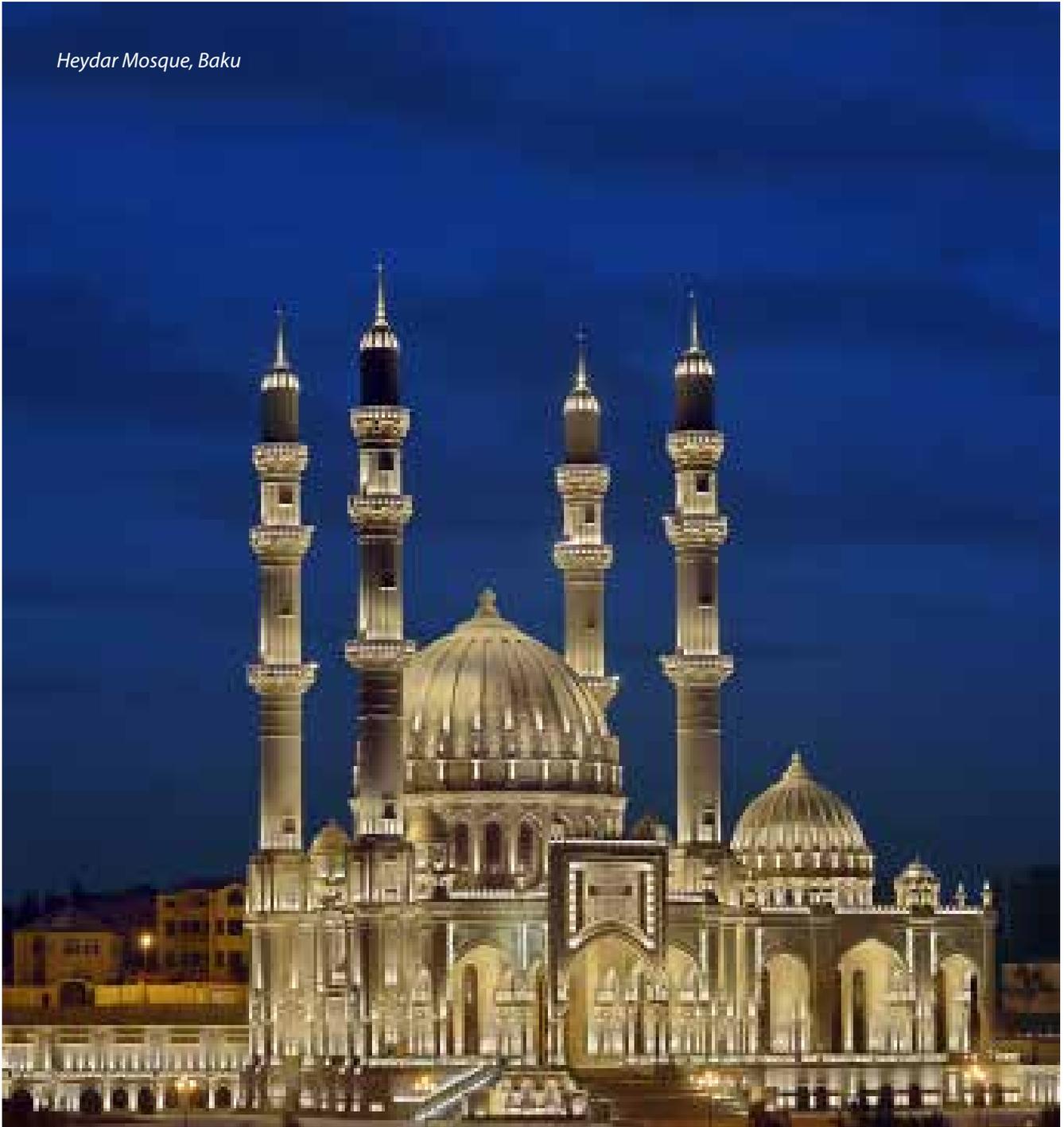
*First of all*, the headscarf worn by Muslim women is the front and center of this cultural debate. It is “both a gender-specific and Muslim-specific visible marker, appears to be a trigger in experiences of discrimination and hate crime”<sup>5</sup>. In a climate of rising Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in Western society, some people might often wrongly perceive the hijab or other forms of Muslim clothing

as “alien”, “un-Western”, or even “threatening” which can foster distrust and prejudice.

*Secondly*, the prevalence of harmful stereotypes is another key factor. The situation is also complicated by



Heydar Mosque, Baku



political agendas and biased media coverage. Unfortunately, the media often contributes to the spread of negative stereotypes. By focusing on extreme cases or problems, they overlook the full range of experiences and achievements of Muslim women, reinforcing harmful narratives. In fact, Muslim women mostly appear in media as victims. They are usually “monolithically portrayed as weak and oppressed, without the right or ability to think by themselves or take control of their own

lives, or as being brainwashed by patriarchal visions”<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, some people see the hijab or niqab as a symbol of radicalism or an unwillingness to integrate into Western societies, when in reality, it is simply a personal religious choice. At the same time rightwing populist parties often use the image of the “oppressed” Muslim woman to push anti-immigrant and anti-Islam policies.

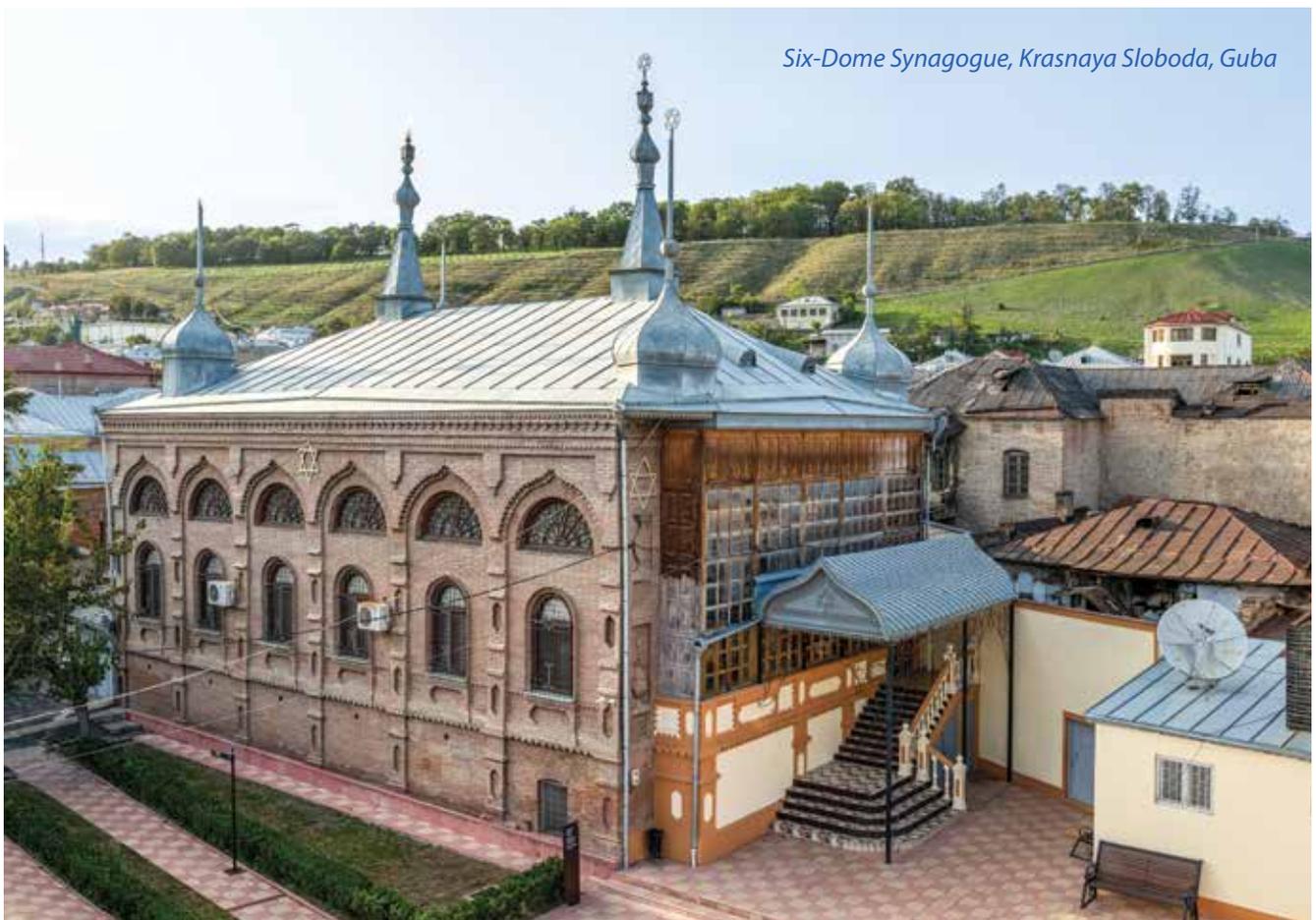
Thirdly, Muslim women also experience harassment and discrimination in various forms such as in work-

places and educational settings. "Research indicates that Muslim women may be "othered" because of their religious dress in workplaces, and face additional barriers to employment compared with other groups"<sup>7</sup>. Thus, they may be denied jobs because of their hijab, pressured to remove it in order to keep their job or education, or limited in career progression.

As a result of this constant exposure to Islamophobia some Muslim women avoid public spaces or events for fear of harassment. In fact, for "Muslim women and girls, the combination of verbal, physical, and online abuse contributes to a pervasive sense of vulnerability and

sal fraternity and social friendship and warned that "violence has no basis in our fundamental religious convictions, but only in their distortion"<sup>9</sup>.

At the same time, these harmful stereotypes could frequently stem from a superficial understanding of Islam or equate it with specific, often radical, interpretations. In Western societies, persistent stereotypes often also portray Islam as a religion that restricts women's rights, assigns them a secondary role, and isolates them from public life. Therefore, it is apparent, that the issue of women's rights in Islam is quite a controversial topic. Today a solid feminist Islamic perspective has emerged



*Six-Dome Synagogue, Krasnaya Sloboda, Guba*

isolation"<sup>8</sup>. They may also feel like they don't belong in society, further deepening their sense of alienation.

On the other hand, secularism implies state neutrality towards religion and an emphasis on individual freedoms. At the same time, a growing number of Christian leaders and public figures advocate for interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. Pope Francis was one such leader who was well aware that religions could be instrumentalized to support hatred and xenophobia. He called for interreligious dialogue in building univer-

and these female scholars, who are also practicing believers, "dispute the misogynistic Islamic interpretations that subordinate women in Muslim societies, and demonstrate - in the name of their faith - that the popular prejudiced readings of Islam are not inherent in the text but are products of their time and place"<sup>10</sup>.

In this sense, education and knowledge sharing can play a pivotal role and introduction of targeted educational programs in schools can raise awareness about Islam, its diversity, and the role of women in the faith

*Church of the Savior, Lutheran Church, Baku*



help break down barriers and foster mutual understanding. Amplifying Muslim women's voices in politics, media, and academia will give them the opportunity to dispel stereotypes and act as role models. Thus, combating Islamophobia, especially as it affects Muslim women, is not just a matter of justice, but also a necessary step toward building a harmonious and truly multicultural society.

In this context, Azerbaijan presents a truly unique example of a multicultural and secular country with a predominantly Muslim population. Here, multiculturalism is also shaped by "civil society, by the individual bonds that people form with one another"<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, "multiculturalism and tolerance are a lifestyle of multinational and multi-confessional Azerbaijani people, as well as an integral part of the state policy, preserved throughout the centuries"<sup>12</sup>. This also shapes the particular role and perception of Azerbaijani women both in the West and the East.

Azerbaijan Democratic Republic is one of the first states in the East (and the first in the Muslim world) to grant women the right to vote in 1918. In fact, it hap-

pened much earlier than in the US and many European countries. Incidentally, the first secular boarding school for girls was also opened in Baku by Azerbaijani oil industrialist and philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev in 1901. This school was "a genuine specimen of secular education for women, skillfully combining Muslim traditions with European modernism"<sup>13</sup>. These facts

in Western society. Public campaigns should also be launched to challenge the stereotypes about Muslim women, and media literacy programs can help the public identify biased or Islamophobic narratives and combat disinformation and promote diverse voices in media. Furthermore, by providing platforms for dialogue, Muslim communities and women's organizations can

*Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Catholic Church, Baku*

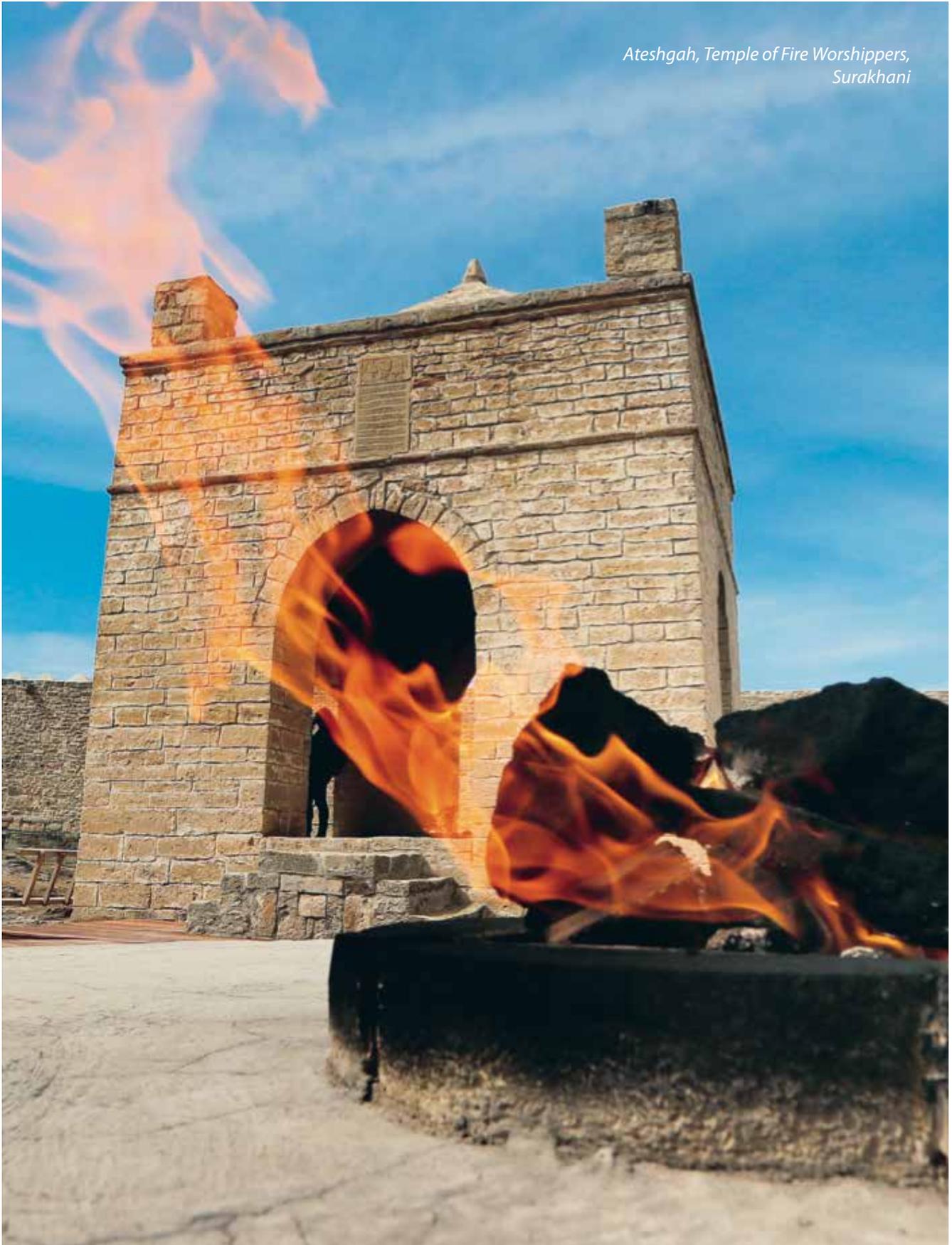
underscore the deep roots of emancipation and active women's participation in the country's socio-political life. During the Soviet period, women gained broad access to education and employment, further strengthening their positions in society.

After Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, a consistent state policy was pursued to increase the role of women in the fabric of society. Indeed, "over the past years Azerbaijan has acquired truly unique experience in successfully ensuring women's rights, their active participation in public and political life. In a world where discrimination still exists, where majority

of women and girls lack access to education and have their basic rights not protected, this experience is still in demand and relevant"<sup>14</sup>.

This is reflected in the Constitution of Azerbaijan adopted in November 1995 that supports gender equality. According to Article 25 (Right to equality), "everyone shall be equal before the law and the courts". At the same time, "men and women possess equal rights and freedoms". It is also indicated that "the State shall guarantee the equality of rights and freedoms to everyone, irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, origin, property status, occupation, beliefs or affiliation

*Ateshgah, Temple of Fire Worshippers,  
Surakhani*





with political parties, trade union organizations or other public associations. Restrictions of rights and freedoms on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, origin, beliefs, or political or social affiliation are prohibited<sup>15</sup>. The Law “On State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men” was also adopted in October 2006. It outlines the legal framework for ensuring gender equality in all aspects of life, including political, economic, social, and cultural spheres and aims to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination<sup>16</sup>.

Today women hold high government positions, they represent 20.8 percent of the total number of members of the Parliament, lead major companies and institutions. They also successfully realize their potential in education, science, healthcare, business, culture, and art. Appointment of Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva as the First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2017 has encouraged women even more to actively participate in the political, economic and social life of the country. The election of Sahiba Gafarova as the chair of Azerbaijan’s Parliament in 2020 was also another remarkable achievement because it was the first time in the history of independent Azerbaijan when a woman was selected for this position. Thus, Azerbaijani women, through their example, their activities, and their way of life, dismantle stereotypes that exist both in the West and the East and pave a way towards a more just and equal world.

In Azerbaijan, Islam, despite its deep roots in society, is not the state religion. The secular nature of the state allows for a harmonious combination of religious values with the principles of a secular society. This creates a favorable environment for women, enabling them to freely practice their faith while remaining full and active members of the modern society. A strong immunity to religious radicalism has formed in Azerbaijan, which also contributes to stability and progress in matters of gender equality.

Azerbaijan’s unique model leads to a distinct perception of Azerbaijani women in different parts of the world. On the one hand, the Azerbaijani women are often seen in the West as a “bridge between East and West”. Their image is one of modern, educated, independent women who simultaneously maintain their cultural identity and connection to traditions. The openness of Azerbaijani women to education, career advancement, and political activity is positively received in the West and helps to pull apart erroneous stereotypes, including those related to Muslim attire. Western observers see that Azerbaijani women can wear the hijab (or not wear it) by their own choice, while actively participating in secular life, which contradicts the widespread prejudice about oppression.

On the other hand, the perception of Azerbaijani women in the East can be more varied. In some more



conservative Eastern societies, their relative freedom and secular lifestyle might cause surprise. However, Azerbaijan's Muslim identity and respect for Islamic values create common cultural ties with Eastern countries. Therefore, Azerbaijani women are seen as a successful example of combining traditional values with modernity, demonstrating the possibility of progress without abandoning cultural roots.

In conclusion, it is crucial to emphasize that in the era of multiculturalism, the dialogue about the role of Islam and the status of women gains particular significance. Azerbaijan's experience vividly demonstrates that it is possible to successfully implement the principles of multiculturalism and ensure equal rights for women in a secular state with a predominantly Muslim population. 🌟

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