

# Islam, Gender and Education in Contemporary Georgia: The Example of Kvemo Kartli

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**Abstract**—Religious minorities of Georgia include Muslims. Their composition is sufficiently miscellaneous, enclosing both ethnical viewpoint and belonging to the inner Islamic denomination. A majority of Muslims represent Azerbaijanis, who chiefly live in Kvemo Kartli (Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Tetri Tskaro, Marneuli and Tsalka). The catalyst for researchers of Islamic History is the geopolitical interests of Georgia, centuries-old contacts with the Islamic world, the not entirely trivial portion of Islam confessor population, the increasing influence of the Islamic factor in current religious-political processes in the world, the elevating procedure of Muslim religious self-consciousness in the Post-Soviet states, significant challenges of international terrorism, and perspectives of rapid globalization. The rise in the level of religious identity of Muslim citizens of Georgia (first of all of those who are not ethnic Georgians) is noticeable. New mosques have been constructed and, sometimes, even young people are being sent to the religious educational institutions of Muslim countries to gain a higher Islamic education. At a time when gender studies are substantive, the goal of which is to eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence in societies, it is essential in Georgia to conduct researches around the concrete problem – Islamic tradition, woman and education in Georgia. A woman's right to education is an important indicator of women's general status in a society. The appropriate resources, innovative analysis of Georgian ethnological materials, and surveying of the population (quantitative and qualitative research reports, working papers), condition the success of these researches. In the presented work, interrelation matters of Islam, gender and education in contemporary Georgia by the example of the Azerbaijani population in Kvemo Kartli during period 1992-2016 are studied. We researched the history of Muslim religious education centers in Tbilisi and Kvemo Kartli (Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Tetri Tskaro, Marneuli and Tsalka) in 1992-2016, on the one hand, and the results of sociological interrogation, on the other. As a result of our investigation, we found that Azeri women in the Kvemo Kartli (Georgia) region mostly receive their education in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Educational and Cultural Institutions are inaccessible for most Azeri women. The main reasons are the absence of educational and religious institutions at their places of residence and state policies towards Georgia's Muslims.

**Keywords**—Islam, gender, Georgia, education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IT should be noted that since 1991, the first women non-governmental organizations have been established in Georgia. They arose due to the sharp political-economic changes during the Post-Soviet period. Initially, women's organizations were striving to reinforce the traditional functions of women and the programs of assisting charitable or unprotected layers covered their activities. In 1995, all

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countries of the South Caucasus joined the agreement “The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW) and considerably increased the quantity of organizations and groups working on women's rights and gender issues. Permanent special state commissions were established with defining functions such as collaborating and pursuing a state gender policy [1]. In 2000, the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia was established; its chairwoman is Leila Suleymanova. The aim of the organization is to involve Azeri women in decision-making processes; to prevent gender-based discrimination against women; to establish a network and collaborate with local and international women's non-governmental organizations; to carry out cultural and educational activities with the participation of young women; and, to support an election culture and vigorous involvement of Azeri women in political and public administration. Since 2000, the organization has implemented nearly 35 projects with the financial support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), etc. [2].

In 2015, Muslim Women Organization (Muslim Women Council) was established at the Administration of Muslims of Georgia. Fifteen Muslim women with religious (Islamic) education entered the new unification. Lamia Gajjeva is the chairwoman of the Muslim Women Council. Evident stirring up of the women's movement was recently caused by increasing contacts with the West, assisting of foreign foundations and development of the civil culture. Researches were conducted to study social-economic and political rights of women representing ethnical minorities in Georgia. Though, interrelation matters of Islam, gender and education were not studied enough. The presented article is a next step for the realization this matter.

The first stage of the research foresaw studying the history of Muslim religious education centers in Tbilisi and Kvemo Kartli (Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Tetri Tskaro, Marneuli and Tsalka) in 1992-2016. The process was led on the base of analyzing the data of appropriate documental resources, scientific literature, analytical works, press and electronic means. The works of Anastasia Ganich (Research Associate, The Caucasus and Central Asia Training and Coordinating Center, Institute of Asia and Africa, Moscow State University – Russian Federation) are immensely significant and dedicated to Muslim society in Georgia [3]. The results of the researches received within the framework of UN Women/EU projects (“Innovative Initiative of Gender Equality” (IAGE) “Women

for Equality, Peace and Development”) are greatly fascinating; the Needs Assessment of Ethnic Minority Women in Georgia, 2014 [4], and the study on the Needs and Priorities of Ethnic Minority Women in the Kvemo Kartli Region, 2014 [5].

The second stage of the research concerns the surveying of the Muslim population (Azerbaijanis) in Kvemo Kartli (several age groups were distinguished, among them were youths of age 18-25 years studying at Tbilisi state and private higher education institutions, Tbilisi State University preparatory courses of Georgian language). The aim of the survey was to present the problems and hurdles of Muslim women education in Kvemo Kartli, as well as to display an attitude and approach of the Azeri population towards the supporting policy of gender equality.

A holistic experience shows us that women and girls representing ethnical or religious minorities were lacking an opportunity to receive an education, to apply any resources and to be employed. Thereto, men discriminate against them, particularly in the case of existing gender stereotypes and ingrained religious traditions. Accordingly, slowly changes in civil consciousness, including an overestimation of the traditional role of women in Kvemo Kartli, are emerging.

According to such a complex approach, the goal of the project participants was to present the entirety of circumstances about the research problem that is undoubtedly exceptionally essential and authentic.

## II. MUSLIM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CENTERS IN TBILISI AND KVEMO KARTLI REGIONS

A lack of educated staff among Georgian Muslims was keenly spotted after the collapse of the USSR and after Georgia was able to gain its national independence. This condition caused a stirring of religious educational activities the in Kvemo Kartli region from Arabic countries, and Iran and Turkey. The situation changed at the end of 1990’s, when Muslim youth could effort themselves obtaining higher religious education at the learning institutions of Azerbaijan (Baku Islamic University, Baku State University – Faculty of Theology), Iran (Al-Mustafa International University in Qom) and Turkey. This is also facilitated by the fact that the vast majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the region of Kvemo Kartli, does not know the state language and are not able to receive higher education in Georgia. Due to the effort of the graduates from these institutions, two Shia madrasas in Tbilisi and Marneuli, in addition to a Sunni madrasa in Meore Kesalo were opened [3].

In 1997, the Imam Reza Shia madrasa was opened in Marneuli, and an academic process started a year later in 1998. The head of the madrasa is Haji Aziz Nabiev (the local Akhund of the Marneuli Mosque). Admission at the madrasa was possible after graduating 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> classes of secondary school. An academic process lasts two-three years and foresaw studying of Islam disciplines (textbooks are composed on the basis of Iranian theologies and are translated into Azerbaijani language by madrasa teachers), as well Persian, Arabic and Georgian languages, computer fundamentally. The spectrum of theological disciplines is wide: the Quran and Qur’anic

Interpretation (Tafsir); the rules of Tajweed (correct pronunciation during recitation); Hadith studies; Islamic law (Al-Fiqh); Prophetic biography (Al-Sira); History of Imams; Islamic ethics (Al-Adab, Al-Akhlaq); and Islamic scholastic theology (‘Ilm al-Kalam) etc. [3].

After finishing the madrasa, graduates receive an appropriate certificate and obtain an opportunity to continue further their religious education beyond the borders of the country. In 2010, the Marneuli madrasa at the Tbilisi Juma Mosque was registered as the Al-Mustafa International University affiliate school (the university is a theological institute, located in Qom, and has other branches in different countries, among them Georgia. Since 2016, the representative of the university in Georgia is Davit Zare). Nowadays, approximately 30 pupils (only boys) are studying at the madrasa from different regions of Georgia. Al-Mustafa University also has a second madrasa named after Resuli Ekrem in Tbilisi, where approximately 25-30 students are studying. A main portion of the pupils consist Azerbaijanis from Kvemo Kartli and they lead with the same academic program as in Marneuli madrasa; though there are distinguished special days for girls (approximately 15) in Tbilisi madrasa. These two madrasas exchange academic personnel as well. These madrasas have a great contribution to religious education, which helps Muslims to know deeply about Islam. These institutions have also played an important role in the survival of Islamic practices, publication and dissemination of Islamic literature [6], [7].

A Sunni madrasa of the Meore Kesalo (region of Marneuli) was opened in 2000 and exists under the patronage of Turkey. More than 60 pupils – both Azerbaijani and Georgian (mostly ethnic Azerbaijanis) are studying there, and the courses are led in both languages. The pupils are divided into three groups: the first group is completed by the graduates of the secondary school, who are studying theological disciplines during three years purposefully. The second group is replenished by the students of a one-year preparatory course who are going to enroll the higher institutions of Turkey, Azerbaijan or Georgia; religious disciplines comprise 10% of the academic program for them. The rest of the time is spent on learning English, mathematics, and computer studies. The third group is filled by the pupils of the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> class, who enter the madrasa after the school, prepare lessons and receive an elementary knowledge about Islam. Arabic, Turkish and Georgian languages are also taught at the madrasa. The program of theological disciplines is asserted by the plenipotentiary representative of the administration of Caucasus Muslims in Georgia. The director of the madrasa is Haji Natig Aliyev [3], [6], [8].

The madrasas are functioning in the following municipalities in Kvemo Kartli: the mosque with the madrasa is located in Bolnisi municipality – village of Pariz; Dmanisi municipality – village Amamlo; Marneuli municipality – village Agmamedlo; in addition, there are Quran courses held by Tetrtsqaro municipality in the village of Tsintskaro [6]. On October 4, 2016, a Muslim library was opened at Tbilisi mosque, religious literature is found and lectures about Islamic

religion are read there. On April 20, 2016 at Tbilisi Juma Mosque was held the Quran Recital Competition among young girls. This competition was organized by the “Muslim Women Council” subordinated to the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia. More than 40 young girls participated in the competition from different regions of Georgia [9].

Since the 2000’s, Shia Islamic culture centers such as “Alul-Beit”, “Ahl ul-Bait” and “Iman” being established in Georgia. These centers lead education activities, publish journals and appropriate literature for Muslims in Azerbaijan and Georgian languages. They organize classes on religion, information technology, and Georgian language for Azerbaijani students. The Alul-beit Center was opened in January of 2010 in Tbilisi (in Ortachala – one of the oldest districts of the old city) and the chief from the beginning up till now is Haji Faik Nabiev.

Ahl ul-Bait was established in Marneuli, 2001 and is guided by Rasim Mamedov, who received an education in Qom. This organization conducts free lessons in English and Georgian, as well as offering academic courses in Quran and Shia theology. It also publishes a monthly journal with a circulation of 2000 in Marneuli [3], [6], [7], [10]. Its editor is Nizami Mamedzade, who says that this journal carries a “scientific-religious-education” character. “We publish it on a goodwill basis, and send it to all regions of Georgia, as well as the city of Ganja in Azerbaijan,” said Mamedzade [11].

Since 2004, the Imam Ali charity foundation is functioning in Marneuli. With over 400 participants, the foundation supports the renovation of mosques, publishes religious literature, organizes events on religious holidays, and provides financial support for needy Kvemo-Kartli residents (provides limited financial assistance Azerbaijani students at different universities) [12].

### III. A QUESTIONNAIRE

#### A. Methodology of the Research

The target group of the research was the Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli. Each district and city was divided into the appropriate strata according to the dimensions of the settlement.

Several strata were distinguished in each district: regional-urban center; small cities and district centers; villages. Conformably, expeditions were executed according to the following plan: 1. Bolnisi municipality (Bolnisi, Kazreti); 2. Gardabani municipality (Gardabani, Nazarlo, Kesalo); 3. Dmanisi municipality (Dmanisi, Kamarlo, Zemo Karabulakhi); 4. Tetrtsqaro municipality (Tetri Tsqaro, Manglisi); 5. Marneuli municipality (Marneuli, Sadakhlo, Kizilajlo, Baidar, Kachagan); 6. Tsalka municipality (Tsalka, Kizil-Kilisa). Azerbaijani students studying at Tbilisi state and private universities, Tbilisi State University preparatory courses of Georgian language were questioning as well.

Selection size: in separate municipalities of Kvemo Kartli, the number of respondents was identified proportionally to the size of the Azerbaijani population. The sample size totals 3,500 respondents. This process was very complicated due to

the lack of knowledge or the in adequate level of understanding of the Georgian language. Accordingly, Azerbaijani students and municipality staff actively assisted respondents in filling out the research questionnaire.

The research tool: questionnaire;

Analyzing of the problems regarding the education of Muslim women in contemporary Georgia (by the example of Kvemo Kartli) was achieved with the help of a specifically prepared questionnaire (among the respondents are 70% women and 30% men). An assessment of the Azerbaijani populations’ attitudes towards gender equality-related policies (among education as well) was attained.

*B. Questionnaire - The Main Findings of the Research Are as Follows:*

#### B1. Age:

1. 18-25 years – 35.2%
2. 25-35 years – 30.4%
3. 35-50 years – 24.3%
4. Older than 50 years – 10.1%

#### B2. Gender:

1. Female – 70%.
2. Male – 30%.

#### B3. Place of Residence:

1. Bolnisi – 30.2%
2. Gardabani – 17.5%
3. Dmanisi – 20.3%
4. Tetri Tskaro – 5.1%
5. Tsalka – 5.7%

#### B3.1. Urban or rural:

1. City – 63.6%
2. Village – 36.4%

#### B4. Marital status:

1. Single – 30.8%
2. Married – 58.1%
3. Divorced – 5.1%
4. Widow – 5%

#### B.4.1. Age married:

1. Before reaching 16 years – 1.1%;
2. Before reaching 18 years – 19.3%;
3. Before reaching 25 years – 59.5%;
4. Before reaching 35 years – 20.1%.

In Georgia, early marriages occur mainly among Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo Kartli region, of which Marneuli is part. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, nearly 7,000 girls have dropped out school before completing a basic level of educational during the period of October 2011 – January 2013. There is no indication regarding the reasons for drop outs, but in most cases, it can be attributed to early marriage. On December 16, 2015, Georgia’s Parliament unanimously passed the third reading of the legislative sentence, which was prepared on the basis of the legislative proposal submitted by the Public Defender. According to the amendment, the rules surrounding the registration for 17 to 18 year olds in changed, allowing only for the court to permit the marriage. The changes also clarified that the circumstances of the marriage registration and validation of the process shall be

determined as one year [13].

#### **B5. Education:**

1. Higher education – 28.4%
2. Student (incomplete higher education) – 30.4%
3. Secondary education/secondary professional – 30.7%
4. Incomplete secondary education – 10.5%

#### **B6. Religion:**

1. Muslims – 48.8%
2. Sunni Muslims – 10.4%
3. Shia Muslims – 40.8%

Muslims of Kvemo Kartli (ethnic Azerbaijani) adherent Shia Islam.

#### **B7. Employment status (indicated by the sector)**

1. Healthcare – 3.8%
2. Education – 20.1%
3. Business – 20.4%
4. Agriculture – 14.8%
5. Social sphere – 5%
6. Public administration (public and private) – 5.2%
7. Unemployed – 35.2%

In spite of their small number, there are women among ethnic Azerbaijanis who are employed and participate actively in the public domain. The chairwoman of the “Active Women’s Association in Georgia” Gultekin Mustafaeva is one of them. Nargiz Aliyeva is the chairwoman of the Azerbaijani Youth Union of Georgia, and 26-year-old Samira Ismayilova is the first ethnic Azerbaijani female politician in the history of Georgia. She graduated from Georgian Technical University, and then continued an education in London, where she studied political science and foreign languages. She also studied in Hungary and Austria.

#### **B8. The level of Georgian language knowledge**

1. I am able to read, write and speak well – 14.1%
2. I understand Georgian, I am able to read, but I cannot write – 26.5%
3. I am able to understand, but I cannot read and write – 38.2%
4. I cannot read, write and speak in Georgian at all – 21.2%

#### **B9. Education for women**

1. It is not necessary – 20.5%
2. It is necessary – 35.8%
3. It is mandatory – 35.6%
4. I have no answer – 8.1%

#### **B9.1. The reasons why respondents have failed to receive a higher education:**

1. Early marriage – 15.5%
2. Social-economic barriers – 42.2%
3. Traditions/gender stereotypes – 18.5%
4. A low level of the secondary education – 23.8%

#### **B10. Religious education for Muslims**

1. It is not necessary – 3.8%
2. It is necessary – 38.6%
3. It is mandatory – 47.8%
4. I have no answer – 6.8%

#### **B11. The necessity of establishing Islamic Theological Institute in Georgia**

1. It is necessary – 38.7%

2. It is not necessary – 1.9%
3. It had already been established – 56.6%
4. I have no answer – 2.8%

#### **B.11.1. Religious education ought to be received by Muslims living in Georgia:**

1. Abroad (indicate the preferred country) – 21%; Iran – 7%; Turkey – 7%; Azerbaijan – 6%.
2. Georgia – 39.9%
3. It does not matter – 30.5%
4. I have no answer – 5.7%

Muslim religious education in Georgia is related to the madrasas that currently exist in mosques, which to date, perform the function of the parish school. Madrasas do not occupy an official status according to Georgian legislation and a document certifying completion of educational studies is issued by them which is not officially recognized anywhere as a qualification, and therefore, members of the community travel abroad (mainly in Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) to receive higher religious education [8].

#### **B12. Awareness of and involvement in Educational Programs**

1. Georgian language learning program for ethnic minorities intended for promoting the acquisition of higher education – 50.5%.

Through the quota system (1+4 system) non-Georgian university entrants can take exams in their native language to only assess their general knowledge. Upon passing the threshold, students are required to complete a one-year Georgian language program and pursue studying at BA level (after completing the program-accumulating 60 credits). The implementation of the policy is one of the major instruments to promote equality and increase access to higher education at Georgian state universities [14].

2. Receiving professional education with full financing by the state and an ability to pass professional tests in the native (Azerbaijani) language – 12.4%
3. Presidential program “Let’s learn Georgian” (short course) – 12%
4. The program of ensuring pupils has access to free textbooks the public schools in Georgia – 70%.
5. I am not yet acquainted with any programs – 12%

According to the information of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, since the introduction of the one-year Georgian language course for ethnic minorities, the number of enrolled students at higher education institutions has increased. According to official data, in 2010 247 non-Georgian entrants were enrolled at HEIs, in 2011 that figure was 430, in 2012 – 589, while the number for 2013 equaled to 890 students, in 2014 – 673, 2015 – 741, and in 2016 there were 960 students enrolled [15].

#### **B13. Main Sources of information (political, economic and cultural information):**

1. Television in Azerbaijani language – 78%
2. Television in Georgian language – 18%
3. Internet – 30%
4. Municipalities – 1%
5. Newspapers – 3%

6. Mosque – 8%
7. Other – 5%

**B14. Accessibility to different educational and cultural institutions (libraries, cinema/theatres, etc.)**

1. Fully available – 3%
2. Inaccessible – 30%
3. Partly available – 50%
4. Do not exist at all – 20%

**B15. Gender equality**

1. Women and men ought to have equal rights – 50.4%
2. Men ought to make the decisions in the family – 35.3%
3. Woman must not actively participate in the public-political process - 35.7%
4. The main role of women is to take care of family and bring up children – 32%
5. Gender equality is unacceptable – 16%
6. An appropriate legislative foundation is necessary for gender equality – 12%

IV. CONCLUSION

1. The percentage of Azeri women who do not understand the Georgian language is high. However, the younger population has a better knowledge of the Georgian language and is more committed to integrating into Georgian social and political life.
2. The majority of respondents believe that education should be mandatory for women; however, the results reveal that the actual situation is different.
3. After introducing preparatory Georgian language courses at higher education institutes, the number of ethnic Azerbaijani women from the Kvemo Kartli region applying to study significantly increased.
4. Ethnic Azerbaijani Muslims are predominantly Shia. Most of the respondents define themselves as Muslim (personally they do not qualify for an accurate placement under the de-nominations of Sunni or Shia).
5. Most of respondents consider that Muslims should receive religious education and that a higher theological institution for Muslims should be established in Georgia.
6. Most respondents were not well-versed or possessed only partial information about the different education programs available in Georgia.
7. Different education and cultural institutions (libraries, cinema/theatres, etc.) are actually inaccessible for the residents of the city (Marneuli, Dmanisi, etc.)
8. For the considerable portion of the respondents, the main source of information is Azerbaijani language television.

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