

**Relations with the European Union in the field of gender equality in education. A view from
Azerbaijan**

by

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In the course of this research, AI tool – ChatGPT were used to find relevant academic terms, paraphrase and re-format references, as well as, in the end of the research period the tool was used to decrease the word count.

Abstract

This thesis explores the cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan in the field of gender equality in education, despite Azerbaijan not being an EU member. The research investigates the extent to which the EU can influence gender equality in Azerbaijan's education system through this cooperation. To achieve this, the study first examines the structure of the Azerbaijani education system, the legislative framework surrounding gender equality in education, and gender-related statistics on both educators and students. Subsequently, a survey was conducted to gauge general awareness of this EU-Azerbaijan cooperation, complemented by interviews with experts to assess the cooperation's effectiveness and long-term impacts.

The findings indicate that EU-Azerbaijan cooperation in promoting gender equality in education has been limited in scope and duration compared to other Eastern Partnership countries. Despite these limitations, the research identified several positive outcomes resulting from this collaboration. Based on expert opinions, the study concludes with recommendations aimed at enhancing this cooperation and increasing its long-term effects. Future research should focus on evaluating the implementation of these recommendations to further advance gender equality in Azerbaijan's education sector.

List of Abbreviations

BSU – Baku State University

Ombudsman - Commissioner for Human Rights of the Republic of Azerbaijan

CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

CSO – Civil Society Organizations

GIZ - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

EaP – Eastern Partnership

EU - European Union

ENP - The European Neighborhood Policy

Gender Hub Azerbaijan – Center for Gender Equality of Youth of the Republic of Azerbaijan
"Gender Hub" Public Union

GSU – Ganja State University

IE - Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan

MSE – Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

RA – Republic of Azerbaijan

RDPU - Regional Development Public Union

SSC - State Statistics Committee

SCFWCA - The State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs of Republic of Azerbaijan

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

UN – United Nations

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

1. Introduction:

Over the past ten years, gender equality has become a significant focus in educational reforms globally. Governments and international bodies now recognize that gender equality intensifies democracy and is essential for an inclusive society that values everyone's contributions. The Beijing Conference highlighted a global dedication to gender equality by introducing the concept of "gender mainstreaming," which involves integrating gender-sensitive policies into all levels and sectors of national development plans and programs. Subsequently, the EU officially committed to incorporating gender issues across all its policies and established that ensuring equal opportunities for all genders is a prerequisite for countries seeking EU membership.

Gender equality in education is a fundamental aspect of promoting social justice and sustainable development worldwide. As nations strive to ensure equal opportunities and rights for all individuals, understanding the dynamics of gender partnerships and their impact on education becomes increasingly vital. In this context, the EU has been actively engaged in fostering gender equality initiatives, both domestically and internationally, including partnerships with countries like Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan, situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, has made significant strides in promoting gender equality in various spheres, including education. With a rich cultural heritage and a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape, Azerbaijan's efforts to address gender disparities in education reflect its commitment to achieving the SDGs, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 4 on quality education (UN, 2015).

The EU-Azerbaijan partnership plays a pivotal role in shaping policies and initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality in education within the country. Understanding the nature and impact of this partnership is crucial for assessing progress, identifying challenges, and informing future strategies.

This research seeks to explore the intricate relationship between the EU's gender partnership and the promotion of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan. By examining Azerbaijan's domestic efforts in promoting gender equality in education and exploring stakeholders' opinions on Azerbaijan-EU relations in this regard, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of gender partnership initiatives and their implications for educational policies and practices in Azerbaijan.

The research question of this study is as follows:

How does EU gender partnership impact the promotion of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan?

For this purpose, first of all, the situation of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan is considered. The levels of education (pre-school, primary, secondary (upper secondary), secondary specialization, vocational education and higher education) and the degree of representation of girls

and boys in these levels of education, and then the work done to improve the national legislation in this direction are investigated.

Another aspect of the investigation of EU-Azerbaijan relations is related to how EU gender programs and policies are adapted at the country level, despite the fact that Azerbaijan is not a member of the EU.

Finally, in this research, the views of relevant stakeholders in Azerbaijan and their perspectives on the future effects of these relations are analyzed.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. Firstly, a literature review is conducted on the researches on gender equality in education in Azerbaijan. In the next chapter, feminism theories that investigate gender equality and equity and gender equality in education are examined. In the methodology section, the research strategy is defined and the datasets are presented. In addition, case selection is described, guidelines for how to collect data, interviews and surveys within the framework of qualitative research are explained. At the end of this chapter, the obtained data were analyzed using appropriate software. In the end, the results of the analysis, discussion and conclusion are provided.

2. Literature review:

2.1. Policy Dimensions and Historical Overview of Gender Equality in Azerbaijan

Policy Dimensions

Azerbaijan is a secular country located in the South Caucasus and gained its independence in the 20th century. It positioned at the nexus of East-West trade routes, has historically been shaped by geopolitical, economic interests, and cultural interactions (UNDP Azerbaijan, 2007).

Azerbaijan is a presidential republic and the President is a significant executive body. The political power is represented by the New Azerbaijan Party, which is the prevailing party. Azerbaijan's economy is dependent on oil and gas, social policies center on education, healthcare, and social welfare programs. Azerbaijan keeps complex relations with its neighbors. Vital issues put in the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, relations with Iran, and strategic partnerships with Turkey and Georgia. Azerbaijan has been condemned for its human rights record, explicitly concerning freedom of expression and political prisoners. The government faces international coercion to enhance its human rights practices. However, Azerbaijan's inclination to uplift its reputation in the international arena has directed to reforms in the field of human rights protection. One of these reforms is the work done in the field of gender equality in education, which we talked about in the next chapters.

Historical Overview of Gender Equality in Azerbaijan

Early Period (1918-1920s)

The approach to gender equality has been different in different periods in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, which was declared an independent and unified republic for the first time in 1918, was also a country in the Muslim East that recognized women's right to vote (Rasulzada, 1920).

Soviet Era (1920s-1990s)

During the Soviet era (1920s -1990s), despite the colonial rule, the USSR saw some advancements for women in education and diverse fields, driven by the 1917 revolution. The women's organization "Zhenotdel", led by pioneers like Alexandra Kollontai, implemented progressive policies in Moscow (Clements, 1992). Her idea of public-funded alimony was controversial, drawing criticism from both women who feared that men would leave them/families, as well as within the Communist Party (Rowbotham, 1971).

In Azerbaijan, local clubs such as Ali Bayramov Club promoted women's freedom and revolutionary ideas. Under Stalin, conflicts arose between traditionalism and modernism, particularly in regions like Azerbaijan, where class and national consciousness were still forming. The USSR's informal ban on veiling and suppression of religious traditions led to a strong backlash post-collapse, with a resurgence of religious practices in the 1990s (Akinchi, 2023).

Post-Independence Period (1990s-Present)

Despite this, Azerbaijan, which was again declared an independent state, had already started implementing new reforms in a number of fields in the 21st century. For example, reforms in the administrative field were related to the establishment of institutions operating in the field of gender equality or improvement of the activities of existing institutions. The reforms carried out in the field of legislation coincide with the beginning of the 2000s. Starting from that period, the independent republic first joined the relevant UN Conventions, and strategies corresponding to them began to be developed. All these reforms are aimed at bringing about innovations in the education system and achieving the desired result.

2.2. Existing Research and Identified Gaps

There are different academic articles and textbooks devoted how Azerbaijan's journey toward gender equality in education, shaped by historical legacies, cultural norms, and external partnerships like those with the EU. Tohidi (1997) emphasizes the complexity of Azerbaijani women's identities, influenced by Russia, Iran, Turkiye, the Caucasus and Islam, making it hard to define a singular Azerbaijani female identity. Heyat (2007, 2008) notes the changing influences on gender equality in Azerbaijan, from the spread of equality concepts during the Islamic era to the decline of religious customs in the Soviet era and the emergence of gender norms. Einhorn (1993) discusses how Islamic perceptions limited women's labor market participation and education. This influence was to such an extent that the construction of the first girls' school in Baku by Azerbaijani philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev in 1901 was considered a great revolution (SCFWCA, 2021). As it is argued in both of Heyat's above-mentioned articles, the fact that Azerbaijan was part of the USSR led to the change of these religious perceptions. However the role of women in society created a conflict between the issue of women's chastity and the USSR's idea of social equality. These authors collectively paint a picture of how historical and cultural influences shape gender identities and norms in Azerbaijan, and this historical and cultural

context is essential when considering the impact of EU partnerships, as it provides a backdrop for understanding the challenges and opportunities these partnerships encounter.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the regaining of Azerbaijan's independence, the influence of Western countries could be seen in the change of gender norms in a positive way. The cooperation of Azerbaijan with international organizations (with UN (1992), with EU (1996)) and the starting of students studying abroad were at the root of these changes. There are some articles related to this post-independence reforms and international influence. Aghayeva (2012) highlighted the importance of incorporating gender education in curricula to study societal assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Since regaining independence, Azerbaijan has made legislative and practical strides in gender equality in education. Babayeva (2022) emphasizes that the main goals of the "State Program of Reforms in the System of Higher Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2009-2013", and the "National Strategy for the Development of Science for 2009-2015" include addressing educational challenges, ensuring gender equality in educational management, integrating Azerbaijani education into the European space. Although the article acknowledges the importance of gender equality in education and highlights some positive initiatives, there is a need for deeper analysis and research to identify and address persistent challenges and disparities in access to education for girls in Azerbaijan. Despite this, this article emphasizes critical role of EU partnerships in shaping educational policies that promote gender equality which is at the center of this research. Gureyeva (2005) discuss reforms in this field and the duties of organizations like UNDP, OXFAM, ISAR, UNICEF, AED in funding these projects. Currently, the EU is a main partner in these initiatives. The author made a number of proposals in her article which were about changes in the curriculum, professional development of teachers, some of which have been fully or partially implemented. For example, one of these proposals was related to conducting trainings for working professors and teaching staff in some Azerbaijani universities and increasing gender sensitivity among the teaching staff of primary and higher schools by including the subject of gender studies in the curricula of future teachers. Currently, the RDPU is carrying out work in this direction within the framework of the "Promotion of Gender Sensitive Schools" project, which we will talk about in the next chapters (GSU, 2022). Given the ongoing and diverse programs in this field, a new study is needed to evaluate current progress and challenges. However, this article's importance for this reserach comes from the details about the involvement of international organizations, including EU institutions, in financing and implementing gender-sensitive educational projects. It underscores the significant role of EU partnerships in advancing gender equality in Azerbaijan's educational sector. It provides practical examples of how EU support has been instrumental in these efforts. Another important point for the research was related to the aspects and directions of researching gender equality in education. In the book "Gender Issues in Azerbaijan", Aghayeva examines the development of various fields from a gender perspective. The textbook, approved by the MSE, offers a historical view of gender issues in Azerbaijani education and outlines two key approaches: ensuring gender equality within the education system and incorporating gender studies into the curriculum (Aghayeva, 2014). These perspectives were expanded in this research, in addition to ensuring gender equality in educational materials, 3 directions of ensuring gender equality in education (students, educators and parents) were mentioned.

In the continuation of the research, the reasons leading to gender inequality in education were investigated. Hasanova & Ahadzada's (2024), Gozalova's (2015) identify factors like traditional sexism, Islamic influence, and career imbalances as barriers to women's education. Gozalova (2015) emphasizes religious issues, while Mollaeva's (2017) addresses gender stereotypes and offers educational solutions. This literature has helped to ask the right questions during the interview in this study. Additionally, Babayeva & Taghiyeva's research (2023) on the gender-oriented approach in the professional development of teachers supported the survey conducted with teachers. This research shows the reliability and validity of the survey conducted by the authors. These articles assisted to find the right reasons and, based on those reasons, helped to examine the current situation in Azerbaijan and make appropriate proposals.

To investigate the impact of EU-Azerbaijan relations on gender equality, it was crucial to examine public opinions and other factors. Relations between Azerbaijan and the EU have been the subject of research by a number of authors. Hajiyeva (2020) outlines how these relations developed and highlights issues, noting that the EU funds organizations focusing on legal issues and criticizing the government to their foreign donors rather than national conflicts, like Nagorno-Karabakh. This article has previously given an overview of how the political situation in Azerbaijan may affect relations with the EU. Therefore, it was easy to come to a general conclusion with the answers received regarding political reasons in the interviews with stakeholders during this research.

Despite several studies on gender equality in Azerbaijan, research specifically focused on gender equality in education is limited and outdated. Many recommendations are being implemented, but statistics are no longer relevant. There is also a lack of comprehensive research on EU-Azerbaijan relations regarding gender equality in education. This thesis addresses these gaps by examining recent cases, conducting interviews with project implementers, and exploring EU-Azerbaijan relations in the context of gender equality in education.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Feminist theories in education

Definitions and dimensions

Gender equality means both parity and equity. Parity refers to equal numbers of women and men but does not ensure true equality, which is where equity comes in. Equity means providing real opportunities for all, often requiring additional resources. However, under this expression there are different dimensions: parity and equity (Chisamy et al, 2012). Aikman and Unterhalter (2005) argue that gender parity is limited to equal enrollment numbers and overlooks important factors like education quality and resources. Unterhalter (2005) notes that equality can mean equal resources, like equal school spots for all, but it can also mean removing systemic barriers like discriminatory laws. Sen's (1999) "*capability approach*" defines gender equality as giving everyone the freedom to choose their life path without discrimination. Gender equity involves creating systems that ensure everyone can make these choices, fostering an environment where all individuals can thrive regardless of their gender.

Other theories that have a role in the emergence of these concepts are different branches of feminist theory.

Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism in education aims to ensure equal opportunities for all genders by removing barriers within schools, societal mindsets, and discriminatory labor practices. It focuses on three main themes: equal opportunities, socialization and sex stereotyping, and sex discrimination. These feminists argue that societal norms, reinforced by family, school and media, limit potential by enforcing traditional gender roles, which restricts occupational and family choices and fosters disadvantageous interpersonal patterns. They advocate for policy changes and legal remedies to address these issues, especially for disadvantaged girls (Acker, 1987).

Critics argue that liberal feminism's focus on equal opportunity and socialization models overlooks patriarchy, power dynamics, and systemic subordination of women by men. (Connell, 1985). Additionally, it is criticized for promoting formal equality without addressing the broader inequalities in society, and for not valuing diversity fully (Epstein et al., 1998; Enslin, 2003; O'Brien, 1983).

Socialist-feminism

The socialist-feminist theory which was influenced by neo-Marxist views focuses on concepts like "reproduction," which explains how schools maintain class and gender hierarchies. For example, Miriam David's work highlights how British schools rely on mothers' unpaid labor and reinforce traditional gender roles. This work sheds light on how schools contribute to the reproduction of traditional gender roles by relying on mothers' unpaid labor and reinforcing the idea that caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility (David, 1984).

This theory is not as developed as liberal feminist and radical feminist theory, furthermore it has been criticized by radical feminists for trying to team up with men, which they argue can lead to women's interests being overshadowed. Radicals also argue that socialists focus too much on capitalism and overlook the various ways men control women through sexuality and threats of violence (MacKinnon, 1982).

Radical feminism

Radical feminism seeks to eliminate male dominance and patriarchal structures entirely, aiming for the abolition of gender oppression, not just equality (O'Brien, 1983). In education, radical feminists highlight two major concerns: the male monopolization of culture and knowledge, which marginalizes women's contributions, and the perpetuation of gender-based violence and harassment in schools. They advocate for prioritizing women's experiences and perspectives in educational concerns (Spender, 1982). Critics accuse radical feminism of simplifying complex issues by making broad generalizations about men and women, overlooking other factors like class, race, and nationality that intersect with gender. For instance, while radical feminists emphasize the universal dominance of men over women, critics argue that this overlooks the diversity among women's experiences based on factors like socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Connell, 1985).

Critical feminism

Another theory that examines gender equality is critical feminist theory. Chisamya et al (2012) noted that critical feminist theory also criticizes liberal feminist theory because it focused only on providing equal opportunity and more on numerical equality, and gives more importance to the equity dimension of the concept of gender equality. Thus, this theory aims to foster equity and the well-being of girls and women, boys and men in their educational experience. Unlike other feminist theories, critical feminist theory offers a nuanced approach to gender equality. Liberal feminism focuses on legal reforms, and socialist feminism targets systemic economic and social changes, but critical feminism combines these perspectives. This theory views gender equality not just as a matter of achieving formal rights and opportunities but as fundamentally linked to broader systems of power and oppression. It acknowledges that achieving gender equality requires challenging deeply ingrained cultural norms, beliefs, and structures that perpetuate inequality. Unlike some other feminist theories, critical feminism emphasizes the intersectionality of gender with other axes of oppression such as race, class, sexuality, and ability. It recognizes that individuals experience oppression differently based on their intersecting identities and that addressing gender inequality requires addressing these intersecting forms of oppression simultaneously.

Lewis and Lockheed (2007) discuss how factors like ethnicity, gender, poverty affect school enrollment in former European colonies. They conclude that socioeconomic factors influence gender equality in education. Boys are often prioritized for schooling in low-income families due to their perceived future roles, family literacy levels, and job opportunities. However, some positive trends are noted: educated women are increasingly valued for their ability to support families, scholarships are helping girls from poor families access education and educated brides are becoming more desirable, shifting views on gender and marriage. This research aims to investigate the impact of socioeconomic status on gender equality in education in Azerbaijan.

Critical feminist theory focuses on power, privilege, and social justice, aiming to dismantle patriarchal systems that perpetuate inequality. It encourages self-awareness and critiques existing power structures, highlighting how patriarchal norms dominate education (De Saxe, 2014). According to critical feminist theory, power dynamics are root causes of gender inequality. This theory questions whether women, if in power, would oppress as men do, or if they share same values (Hooks, 1984). This question has been answered in different ways by different authors. Taking into account that Azerbaijan is a country with male dominated power dynamics, this study investigated the causes of gender inequality in a country with this type of system.

As Levit & Verchick emphasized (2006), feminist legal theory begins with the central role of law in the creation of gender hierarchies. Traditional legal rules, practices, and institutions have often reflected and reinforced patriarchal values, prioritizing male experiences and perspectives while marginalizing or ignoring women's experiences and interests (Levit & Verchick, 2006, p. 3). This theory posits that legal systems are deeply embedded with patriarchal values that prioritize male experiences and marginalize women. This aligns with the critical feminism, which critiques

patriarchal power across social institutions and cultural norms. By emphasizing intersectionality, critical feminist theory shows how legal frameworks perpetuate multiple forms of oppression, advocating for comprehensive social transformation beyond legal reforms.

De Saxe (2014) examined the importance of critical feminist theory in education in the article. He emphasizes integrating critical feminism into teacher education with critical pedagogy. Without feminist perspectives, critical pedagogy may fall short of democratizing education. By incorporating critical feminism, educators can better address race, class and gender issues, creating inclusive equitable classrooms. This framework helps educators implement resistance methodologies and become more self-reflective, critical, engaging deeply with their students and challenging dominant ideologies in both teacher education programs and future classrooms (ibid.).

A number of feminist theories have been reviewed above, and now let's look at the following arguments to choose the best theory that fits the objectives of this research:

The theory most compatible with this research context is critical feminist theory. Liberal feminist theory focuses on providing equal opportunities and eliminating barriers, and can overlook systemic inequalities, while socialist-feminist theory focuses on class and systemic inequalities, it can overemphasize economic factors and ignore cultural and institutional aspects, while radical feminist theory aimed at dismantling patriarchal structures, but only focused on male-dominance issues. It can be concluded that the scope of critical feminist theory is wider and this theory addresses the intersectionality of gender with other forms of oppression (e.g., cultural, socioeconomic), challenges systemic and institutional barriers, which are crucial in understanding how EU policies are adapted in Azerbaijan, and offers a nuanced approach to policy adaptation, recognizing the need to challenge deeply ingrained cultural norms and structures. Critical feminist theory offers the best lens for this research because it not only aims for formal equality but also emphasizes the importance of equity and the broader systems of power and oppression. Given the cultural and political context of Azerbaijan, this theory helps address the deeper, systemic issues that might hinder gender equality in education, providing a thorough understanding of the impact of EU initiatives. Therefore, the findings were analyzed through these concepts: power dynamic and patriarchal structures, intersectionality (class difference) and socioeconomic factors, legal and policy frameworks.

3.2. Theories of Policy Adaptation

As this study also examines how the EU's programs on gender equality in education are adapted in Azerbaijan, it is necessary to first look at the theories related to policy adaptation and the influence of western feminist theories in other countries.

As the EU enlargement process gains popularity, third countries are adapting their policies to align with EU standards. Before examining how Azerbaijan can adapt EU gender policies, it is important to note the nuance of EU policy adaptation. Ioannou and Kentas (2012) identified two types of policy adaptation in the example of the Republic of Cyprus: normative and cognitive. "Cognitive adaptation" refers to increasing understanding or awareness, while "normative framework" refers to established gender equality rules and standards. "A Cognitive deficit" indicates a lack of understanding on how to internalize and apply necessary changes for gender equality.

One of the factors affecting policy adaptation in the context of gender equality in education is related to how western feminist norms and values affect other communities. Hirschmann (2002) notes that there was a dilemma faced by Western feminism regarding cultural sensitivity. On one hand, feminists understand the importance of respecting different cultural contexts because women's experiences vary based on where they live. They try to avoid imposing Western ideas on other cultures. However, this can sometimes lead to cultural relativism, where harmful practices against women are excused in the name of respecting culture. This happens because many cultures are patriarchal, meaning they favor men and oppress women. While it's important to respect cultural differences, it's also crucial to challenge practices that harm women, even if they are part of a cultural tradition.

However, Mohanty (2006) notes that western feminist theories view women in non-western countries as the same and ignore diversity. These theories were criticized by the author for creating a general image of a non-western woman (sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, and tradition-bound). The author also pointed out that western feminist theories see women as victims of the system, religion or male domination, but labeling women as victims oversimplifies the social and political factors behind it. Also, the author shows the restriction of women's rights based on the example of Zambia as a result of the influence of the colonial policy of the west. This means that the influence of western feminist theories and western feminist norms in general is not always positive. Based on Mohanty's opinion, this study has investigated whether the EU applies a one-sided approach towards Azerbaijan, or whether it takes into account political factors and differences between countries and applies individual approaches.

3.3. EU Enlargement and Cooperation with Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan and the EU have been working together on various agreements to improve their partnership. Azerbaijan sees cooperating with the EU as an important part of its foreign policy. Both sides have been involved in many projects covering different areas like economics, culture, and the environment. The EU is a powerful group that's getting bigger by including new member countries. It's important for the EU to have good relationships with its neighbors and other regions for things like a strong economy, stable politics, and safe borders. Understanding how the EU has been expanding can help us see how it started working with Azerbaijan. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the EU enlargement strategy.

The idea of EU enlargement was first proposed by President of France - Georges Pompidou. He noted that one of the three main issues facing the EU (finishing the common market quickly; second, making the European Community stronger, especially in economic and monetary matters; and third, letting more countries join the Community) is the EU enlargement (Federiga & Angelescu, 2012).

Aliyeva (2006) emphasized that the EU enlargement was significant beyond Europe's borders, indicating its potential to include countries further east. These countries had to demonstrate their commitment to shared values, showing that the concept of "Europe" wasn't just about geography but also about willingness to reform. This offered hope to states on the geographic edge of Europe

that they could join the EU through reform efforts and improved relationships, potentially gaining accession in the future.

The ENP was first implemented in 2004 in order to create a zone of security and prosperity along the borders of the EU. The main goal of participating here was to create a free trade zone and gain access to the EU internal market (ENP Strategy paper, 2004).

The EaP program is a part of the ENP and was officially launched in 2009. It aims to help countries in Eastern Europe, particularly those that were once part of the Soviet Union, to become more economically liberal and democratic. The idea for this program was first proposed by the foreign ministers of Poland and Sweden in 2008, and it initially targeted six countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. These countries were interested in working with the EU to improve their relations and welcomed the initiative. For example, Azerbaijan's foreign minister expressed willingness to collaborate with the EU on specific programs within the Eastern Partnership (Marcin, 2009).

EU relations with Azerbaijan will provide bilateral benefits. While Azerbaijan's natural resources are important for the EU's interests, Azerbaijan also tends to benefit from the EU's economic power. In this context, the beginning of relations between Azerbaijan and the EU, especially the work done within the framework of gender equality, will be answered in analysis part.

The theoretical framework, grounded in various feminist theories, helps to shape the research questions and objectives by highlighting specific aspects of gender equality that need to be examined. The complex and nuanced nature of feminist theories suggests a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring the detailed and contextualized experiences of individuals. In addition, to observe the general situation, a study was conducted with the help of quantitative research. The details of the process have been detailed in the next chapter.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research strategy and research questions

The main research question for conducting research on the review of relations between Azerbaijan and the EU in the context of gender equality in education is as follows:

How does EU gender partnership impact the promotion of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan?

To find an answer to this question, it is necessary to present the following sub-questions:

- *How does Azerbaijan promote gender equality in education, domestically?*
- *How are gender programmes in education of the EU adapted in the Azerbaijani context?*
- *What are the opinions of stakeholders on Azerbaijan-EU relations in the direction of gender equality in education?*

Both qualitative and quantitative research has been done to answer each of the above-mentioned questions. Thus, when answering the first and the second question, qualitative research came into

play when investigating real cases of work done in the field of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan with the help of governmental and NGOs, as well as official media organizations. This research strategy also includes interviews to be conducted to answer the second question. During the research, 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were open-ended, the interview allowed for detailed answers, and although the interview had to follow a general structure, the interviewee had flexibility regarding the answers given. The procedure for conducting interviews is presented in the “Data collection methods” section, selection of interviewees is provided in the “Sampling” section, and analysis of the interviews is given in the “Data analysis” section.

Quantitative research plays a role when we use statistics to analyze the status of gender equality in education. To see how women and men are represented in the education system in Azerbaijan, the statistics provided by the SSC has been reviewed. Representation of women and men in education should be considered both the number of male and female teachers, and the degree of representation of girls and boys at primary, secondary and higher education levels.

Simultaneously, to answer the third sub-question, a survey has been conducted among the teachers of several Azerbaijani schools, which is considered a part of quantitative research. This survey was conducted in order to study the opinion of teachers about the relations between the EU and Azerbaijan in the direction of promoting gender equality in education. The survey was conducted online. Some of the survey questions were multiple questions, some were scale items. The survey questions were selected in consultation with the first supervisor and based on previous available researches. Information about the survey questions and procedure is given in the “Data collection methods” section, selection of survey participants is presented in the “Sampling” section, and analysis of the survey is given in the “Data analysis” section.

4.2. Case selection

The reason for choosing Azerbaijan regarding gender equality in education is related to the following circumstances:

Azerbaijan has been under the influence of various powers for many years, for example, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was ruled under the rule of Tsarist Russia, and at the beginning of the 20th century (1918), it experienced a 23-month period of independence, and then in 1920, it fell under the rule of the USSR. Also, starting from the Middle Ages, Azerbaijan was invaded by the Arabs, and the seeds of the Islamic religion began to spread in the Azerbaijani society (Rasulzada, 1920).

In recent times, the work done in the field of gender equality in Azerbaijan has changed its place on the world scale. Thus, according to the gender gap 2023 index in the statistics prepared by the World Economic Forum, Azerbaijan ranks 97th. Also, in the statistics, it was noted that Azerbaijan advanced 4 places compared to last year and increased its score by 0.0005.

Another reason is having access to the necessary information. Azerbaijan is my home country and therefore I have detailed information about the events that happened in Azerbaijan, and I also have no language problem to get other information. In addition, as mentioned in the data collection

methods section, one of the methods is conducting interviews and surveys, and the ease of access to the people to be interviewed is also an important factor for case selection in this context. The selection procedure of those persons will be mentioned in the sampling section.

4.3. Data collection methods

The data collection method for the study depends on the research strategy. During the qualitative strategy study, real cases have been investigated, interviews and surveys are conducted.

The first question examines what is being done in the field of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan. To find an answer to this question, first of all, the information has been reviewed on the official pages of the MSE, as well as the official pages of the other government organizations such as the SCFWCA, the IE, as well as NGOs that are active in this field and are partners of numerous projects. These institutions are the main initiators or executors of the implemented projects. In addition, the statistics prepared by the SSC has been reviewed in order to look at the situation of ensuring gender equality in education in Azerbaijan.

It is possible to see the source of the data collected and the general results in order to investigate the work done in Azerbaijan in the field of gender equality in education in the Appendix I.

When answering the second question, two types of policy adaptation methods named in the theoretical framework are considered. When examining normative adaptation, firstly it is considered how EU policies are reflected in Azerbaijani legislation. Considering that Azerbaijan is not a member of the EU, this reflection is considered a non-binding adaptation.

In order to examine the normative adaptation, first of all, the compliance of the adopted acts with the EU standards is considered. In addition, it is investigated how the policies and programs of the EU for Azerbaijan are implemented in the country. Cognitive adaptation is related to stakeholders' opinions, the answer to which is sought in the third question. By this way, the understanding and awareness referred to by cognitive growth is tested.

The third question is to investigate what are the opinions about the relations between the EU and Azerbaijan in the context of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan. Firstly, document analysis is conducted to investigate how the relations between Azerbaijan and the EU began. Then interviews and survey are conducted to investigate opinions.

5 interviews was planned for conducting the research. One of the candidates did not agree with the conditions of anonymity regarding the name of her organization. Instead of the former candidate, I contacted another one and 5 interviews were conducted with experts in the relevant field. The interviews were conducted online through the Zoom platform in English and Azerbaijani. Each scheduled interview was conducted according to the following guideline as much as possible and took approximately 20-30 minutes.

Interview questions are divided into 4 groups: 1. Role of the EU; 2. Impact on stakeholders; 3. Challenges and opportunities; 4. Future outlook. In the first part, there were questions about the effectiveness of EU initiatives and programs in the direction of promoting gender equality in education in Azerbaijan, in the second part, there were questions about the general perception of

the EU's participation in promoting this field, the general level of awareness, in the third part, there were questions about the main problems to achieve gender equality in education in Azerbaijan and how successful the cooperation with the EU was in overcoming these obstacles, and in the last part, there were questions about the potential long-term effects of this partnership. Interviews were recorded with consent and stored securely on my password-protected laptop. To ensure anonymity, interviewees were labeled as Interviewee 1 through Interviewee 5.

Another method for data collection is conducting surveys. The survey was conducted among 92 teachers. This survey is designed for the participation of teachers from both urban and rural areas of Azerbaijan and is prepared through Google Forms. Teachers' personal information (such as name, surname, e-mail, contact number, etc.) was not requested through the survey. The only personal information required in the demographic information section is about the seniority of the teachers, the names of disciplines they teach and the region where the school is located. The survey aimed to study opinions on Azerbaijan-EU relations in promoting gender equality in education. The anonymity of responses has been fully preserved and used in accordance with Azerbaijan's "Law on Personal Information."

The other questions in the survey are related to the following 3 topics:

- *Awareness and Perception of EU Initiatives;*
- *Impact on Teaching and School Environment;*
- *Challenges and Opportunities*

4.4. Sampling

The main point in planning interviews is the selection of interviewees.

Interviewees for this study were chosen based on their roles as key actors or executors in the field. This selection ensured representation from both executive government organizations and NGOs, including those responsible for implementing the Eastern Partnership Policy and gender projects in Azerbaijan. A teacher was also included for educational insights. Candidates without relevant experience, authority, or willingness to participate were excluded. Interviewees were drawn from the EU Regional Communication Program for the Eastern Neighbourhood (EU Neighbours East), the Council of Europe office in Baku, Gender Hub Azerbaijan (an NGO), MSE, and BSU. The main reason for choosing these people for the interview is that their activities coincide with the goal of the thesis, as well as having relevant contacts and relationships with those people.

Selection of the participants of the survey is related to the fact that I have access to most of the participants of this survey. With the help of my mother who is a teacher, and some of my friends who have worked in education institutions, I could get the access to share the survey among the teachers. On the other hand, the reason for conducting a survey among teachers is related to their large number. In order to find a general answer to the third sub question, it is more appropriate to get the opinion of approximately 100 teachers. Since interviewing 100 teachers is impossible from the point of view of this research, the survey method is the most ideal option in this context.

4.5. Reliability and validity

Validity in research is related to the accuracy and truthfulness of scientific findings. Reliability pertains to the consistency, stability and repeatability of the information provided by participants and the investigator's ability to accurately collect and record data (Brink, 1993).

Taking into account the above nuances, it should be noted that the data obtained as a result of the conducted research has trustworthiness. Because both the interview and the survey results were analyzed, the answers given were reflected in detail, quotations and examples of the answers given by the interviewees and survey participants were presented. This allows the reader to understand the context of the opinions. In addition, the selection of stakeholders from different sectors, both government and non-government organizations, led to the reflection of different viewpoints, which contributed to the comprehensive understanding of the topic. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. This has created conditions for accurate data capture. Surveys and interviews were also used to validate findings as multiple sources of data. For example, the coincidence of answers given by the participants in the interviews and in the survey on categories such as awareness level, solutions, challenges show the robustness of the data.

However, there were challenges and limitations that affected reliability and validity. The stakeholders interviewed were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. This could introduce a limitation, as those who chose to participate might have different views from those who did not. As a researcher, I tried to remain open-minded and let the data speak for itself, but there might be a bias in responses where participants might provide socially desirable answers or perspectives aligned with their organizational interests. Furthermore, findings may not be generalizable beyond the context of Azerbaijan due to its socio-political and cultural factors.

4.6. Data analysis

The analysis of the interviews was carried out using the thematic method. First of all, transcriptions of the interviews were prepared. Given that existing programs for preparing transcriptions are paid, this work was carried out by myself and categories and codes corresponding to the given answers were defined. The transcriptions of the interviews were prepared in a simplified form, filler words and verbalization were removed, edited for clarity. According to the transcriptions, themes were identified and recorded in the coding scheme. Each theme and the corresponding codes were reviewed based on the concepts obtained in the theoretical framework.

A coding scheme was used to analyze the data collected during the interview.

Through the transcriptions of the interviews, the coding scheme in the table below was developed. This scheme divided the answers given by the interviewees into separate themes and codes in order to answer the 3rd sub-question.

Table 1. *Coding scheme*

Source: Author's own illustration

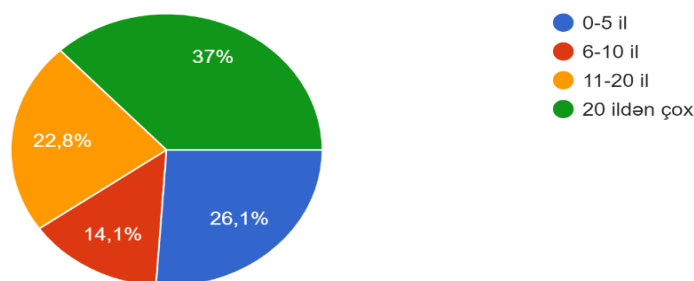
Themes	Codes	Definition
Perception	Awareness level	The awareness level of EU-funded projects is influenced by power dynamics, as certain organizations or individuals control information flow, affecting who benefits. Class differences (Intersectionality) also play a role, with wealthier students often having better access to information about EU initiatives than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
Collaborations	Types of EU Collaboration Projects (e.g., public sessions, IT encouragement)	The types of EU collaborations reflect power dynamics in decision-making about project priorities and resource allocation. Projects like IT encouragement challenge patriarchal norms by promoting gender equality in STEM fields.
Challenges	Gender Insensitivity in Education System Cultural Challenges (e.g., early marriages) Lack of Male Involvement Gender Blindness in Leadership	These four challenges stem from patriarchal norms that prioritize male-dominated fields and perpetuate gender stereotypes. Legal frameworks may lack gender-sensitive provisions in education, ignore to address systemic gender biases and promote inclusive educational practices. Socioeconomic factors intersect with cultural norms, impacting girls from lower-income families disproportionately and reinforcing barriers to education.
Solutions	EU Solutions as Benchmarks Legislative and Strategic Changes	EU solutions as benchmarks reflect power dynamics in international relations, influencing local gender equality policies. Socioeconomic factors also influence how EU solutions are adopted and adapted in different contexts. Legal frameworks guide the implementation of legislative changes, and these changes needed reflect power dynamics within national governance structures, where decisions on policy reforms are influenced by political interests and stakeholder dynamics.
Future Outlook	Sustained Cooperation	The EU's long-term commitment to Azerbaijan enhances initiatives promoting gender equality by ensuring sustained efforts and systemic changes. Continuous support drives equitable practices, deeper engagement, and comprehensive program implementation, integrating gender equality into Azerbaijani institutions and societal frameworks.

	National Support	The need for national support is critically linked to the legal and policy frameworks that govern gender equality initiatives. National support ensures that EU-funded projects align with local laws and policies.
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In order to analyze the answers given in the survey, the results were transferred to Google Sheets and thus the answer to each question was analyzed individually. 92 teachers participated in the survey, 49 of them work in urban, 35 in rural, and 8 in district schools. The subjects taught by the teachers participating in the survey can be divided into 4 groups: Humanities, STEM, Primary and Pre-education. Information about the seniority of the participating teachers is shown in the diagram below. The results of both the interview and the survey can be found in the next chapter (Sub-question 3).

Figure 1: Seniority of the participating teachers

İş stajınız nə qədərdir? (How much work experience do you have?)
92 cavab



5. Analysis

5.1. How does Azerbaijan promote gender equality in education, domestically?

In the second chapter, we looked at the historical overview in the direction of gender equality in Azerbaijan. Further specifying the direction, let's take a look below at the work done in the field of gender equality in education.

5.1.1. Key Institutions and Their Collaborative Efforts in Promoting Gender Equality in Education in Azerbaijan

Several institutions and NGOs lead in promoting gender equality in education, often collaborating on domestic events and initiatives. The most important one is the SCFWCA, established as the State Committee on Women's Issues by a 1998 presidential decree and renamed in 2006. This central executive authority implements state policy on family, women's and children's problems, develops state program projects, monitor gender equality, works with men and women on gender

principles, drafts relevant legislation, and cooperates with international organisations (Decree No. 444 & Article 8-9, 2006).

In 2004, SCFWCA initiated the Equal Opportunity Act (Asian Development Bank, 2005) which was adopted in October 2006, as the "Law on Guarantees of Gender (Men and Women) Equality". SCFWCA also developed a training manual called "Gender Equality" with GIZ and BSU, covering gender equality origins, international treaties, domestic laws, gender stereotypes, and implementation in various sectors (SCFWCA, 2023).

Since 2021, SCFWCA, MSE, and the Education Development Fund have run the "Hanifa Malikova - Zardabi scholarship program", emphasizing the importance of girls' education and fostering their active involvement in state development. The program has supported 93 female students (SCFWCA, 2024).

In 2015, the Committee on Family, Women and Children's Problems was established in the Parliament of the RA to deal with draft laws and decisions related to the formulation and implementation of state policy in this direction.

Another important institution is MSE, which oversees various educational agencies and institutions, including those for preschool, general, vocational, and higher education, as well as quality assurance and informatization departments. It also manages special schools and boarding institutions to promote inclusivity (MSE, n.d.).

To ensure gender equality in education, MSE works to eliminate gender stereotypes in educational materials, and allocates grants for relevant projects. For example, the "Gender Equality in Education" project funded through the "VII Grant Competition on Development and Innovations in Education" for 2023, was implemented in Lerik, Azerbaijan, addressing local challenges from November to March (MSE, 2023a).

One of the actions carried out by MSE in this field is related to the organization of classes dedicated to gender equality in general education schools. These classes were held in schools under the supervision of the Baku Regional Education Department within the framework of UNESCO's "World's Biggest Lesson" project (Baku Regional Education Department, 2018).

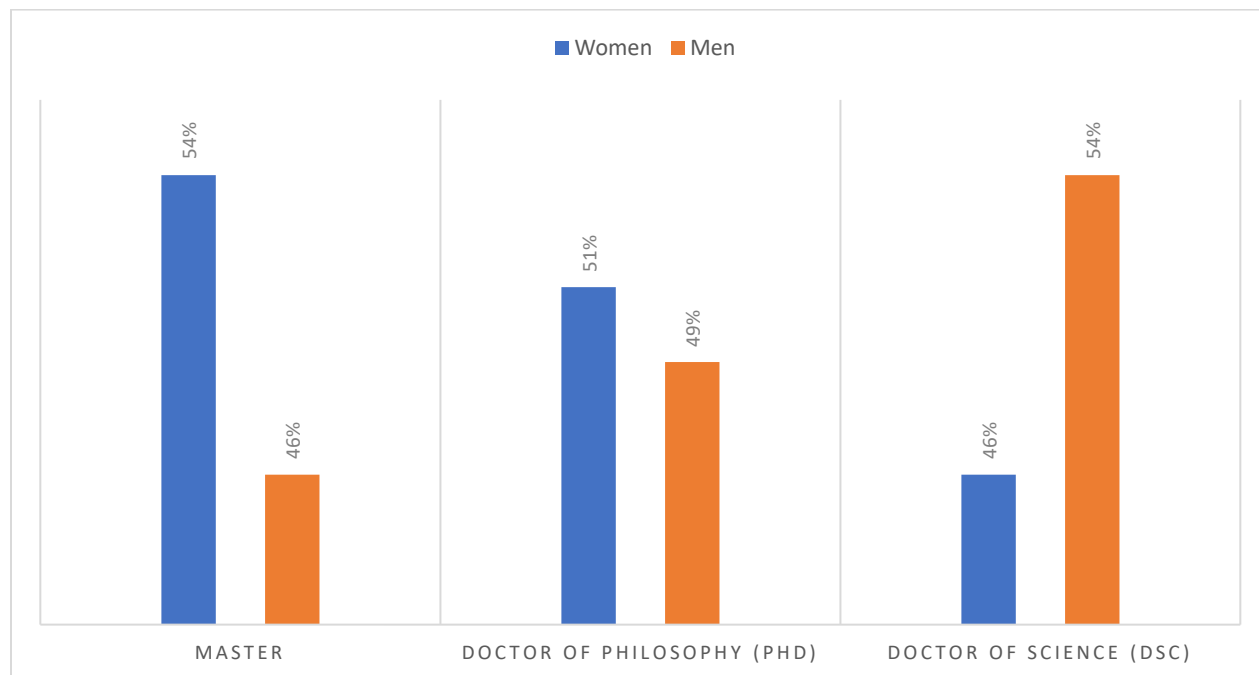
One of the larger measures implemented by the Ministry is state programs for education abroad. These programs enable Azerbaijani students to study abroad at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels with the scholarship of the RA. According to the former Minister of Education Jeyhun Bayramov, 3558 scholarship places were allocated within the framework of the "State Program for the Study of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad in 2007-2015". Among those occupying those places, the place of women according to the level of education is as follows:

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among those occupying those positions is as follows according to the level of education: (Azerbaijani teacher, 2018):

Figure 2: Statistics for women and men who received the right to study abroad under the State Program announced in 2007-2015

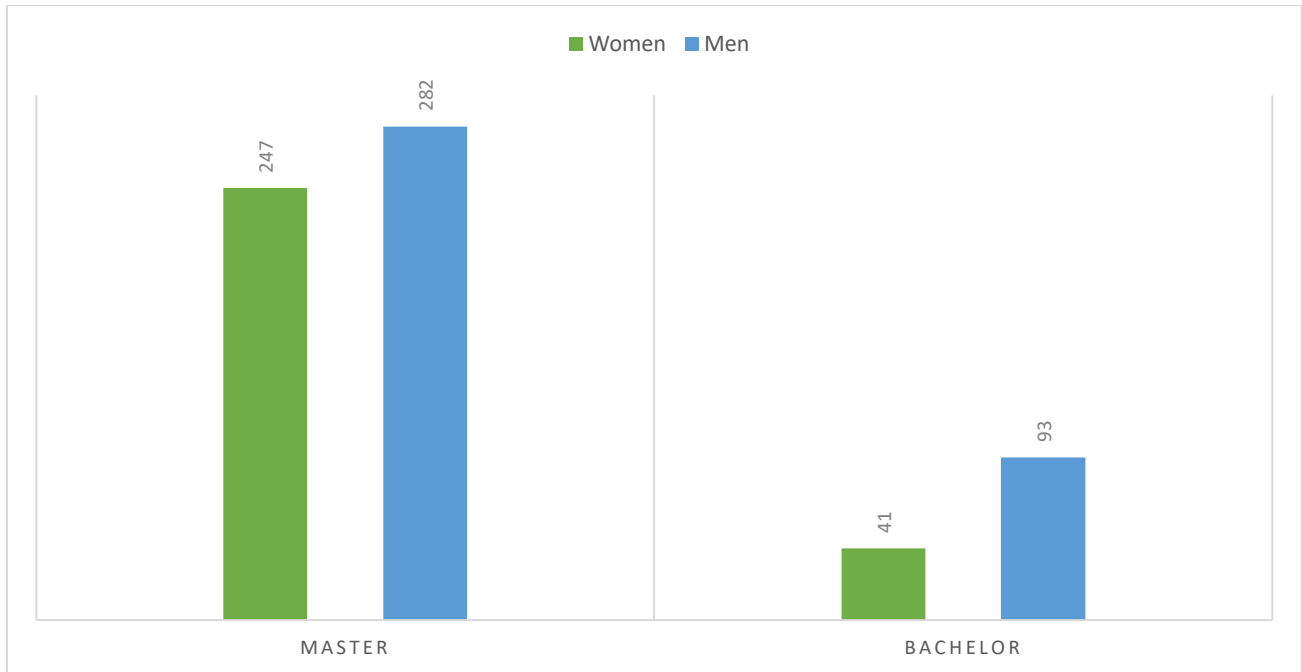
Source: <https://www.muallim.edu.az/news.php?id=967>



Within the framework of the "State Program for 2022-2026 for Young People to Study in Prestigious Higher Education Institutions of Foreign Countries" announced in 2022, 661 scholarship places have been allocated until 2024. The place of women among those occupying those positions is as follows according to the level of education (MSE, 2023b):

Figure 3: Statistics for women and men who received the right to study abroad under the State Program announced in 2022-2026

Source: <https://dp.edu.az/uploads/fileuploads/2024/04/be6197bac8e044588ebdffe2c33c1be4.pdf>



Another institution with activities in the relevant field is IE, a subsidiary of MSE. In the framework of the "Promotion of gender-oriented approach in general education" project implemented by IE together with UNPF, it has prepared textbook sets applied at the general education level. This set includes 7 textbooks, 12 workbook, 10 methodical tools (Azertac, 2022). In terms of whether or not these materials really promote gender equality, IE's group of experts have reviewed them according to UNESCO's "Guidelines for textbook review and analysis from a gender perspective" (2010) and "Promoting gender equality through textbooks: a methodological guide" (2015). As a result of the inspection, it was found that gender equality and inclusiveness were not preserved in the materials, and various gender stereotypes appeared. For example, stereotypes related to social roles depict women as more beauty-conscious, passive in public life, and a caring mother, while men are depicted as brave and active participants in social life. Stereotypes related to the profession are manifested in the depiction of women as tailors, weavers, confectioners, and teachers, and men in the roles of carpenters, construction workers, drivers, gardeners, and athletes. Clothing stereotypes show that women are mostly depicted in red, purple, and pink, and men in blue (Nazirova et al., 2022).

Picture 1. Stereotype related to professions

Source: 4th grade Mathematics textbook, page 25



The Ombudsman plays a crucial role in gender equality by evaluating women's rights, proposing new laws, and revising existing regulations. She focuses on promoting women's education and health rights, addresses violence against women, and discusses gender differences in leadership and career models. Her work involves safeguarding human and civil rights, conducting studies, addressing rights violations. Complaints can be submitted via mail, the official website, in person at the main office or regional centers, and through hotlines for torture and children's issues (Ombudsman, n.d.).

Partnerships with NGOs play a key role in ensuring that national mechanisms and procedures are legitimate and robust and can transform women's social lives. There are a number of NGOs and public unions operating in the field of gender equality in Azerbaijan. Among these organizations, RDPU and Gender Hub Azerbaijan are the most active in this field.

The "Regional Development" Public Union, initiated by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, aims to engage in socio-economic, public, and cultural affairs, build civil society, and support regional development. It conducts public oversight, reviews citizens' appeals, and collaborates with institutions on various projects across the republic (RDPU, n.d.). The union works with the EU, UNFPA and was a key executor of the "Gender sensitive schools" project under the "EU4 Gender equality" program jointly implemented by UN Women and UNFPA with EU funding. Details on this project will follow in the next sub-question.

Gender Hub Azerbaijan is one of the most active NGOs implementing various projects in the field of gender equality in Azerbaijan. Within the framework of the project "Building Resilience in the Eastern Neighborhood" in the field of gender equality in education, this organization has carried out numerous information sessions in remote village schools, as well as in Baku and the regions they have conducted training courses called "Teachers against gender stereotypes" and "Gender Equality Ambassadors in Education" (Gender Hub Azerbaijan, n.d.).

It was also the main executor of the project called "Papas' school-Transformation of Responsible Fatherhood" within the framework of the "EU4 Gender equality" program jointly implemented by UN Women and UNFPA with the financial support of the EU. You can find a more detailed explanation about that project in the answer to the next sub-question.

5.1.2. Structure of education system in Azerbaijan and representation of girls and boys according to educational levels

According to the Global Gender Gap Index, Azerbaijan fell from 83rd in 2016 to 91st in 2017 in terms of educational attainment. According to the 2023 indicators of this index, Azerbaijan was 54th out of 146 countries in the same subindex (educational attainment) (World Economic Forum, 2023, p. 17).

The question whether men and women with similar academic skills and achievements have equal opportunities to succeed and access higher education. This question remains largely unanswered in most developing countries. However, a study by Tan and Mingat in 1992 found that in some Asian countries, there is a positive link between the percentage of women enrolled in higher education and the country's per capita Gross National Product (GNP), which is a measure of

economic performance. This suggests that in countries with higher economic performance, more women tend to enroll in higher education (Lewis & Dunder, 2008).

According to World Bank statistics, Azerbaijan ranks 110-120 among 200 countries in terms of GNP per capita (World Bank, n.d. (a)). In addition to economic indicators, it is also necessary to examine the country's educational and legislative system, which create conditions for equal education .

The education system in Azerbaijan consists of pre-school, primary, secondary (upper secondary), secondary specialization, vocational education and higher education levels. Preschool education deals with education of children aged 1-5 years. In order to strengthen the participation of children in preschool education, the Law on Preschool Education was adopted in 2017.

According to Article 3.0.7 of this Law (№ 585-VQ, 2017) , one of the principles of this education system is the mandatory implementation of school preparation for children who have reached the age of 5 in general education schools. Therefore, according to the following statistics presented in 2017, the percentage of participation of 1-5-year-old children in preschool education was 13.8%, and the participation rate of 5-year-old children in preparatory school groups was 65%. Also, among the 1-5-year-old children involved in preschool education, the participation of girls was 46.2% (Asian Development Bank, 2019, p. 27).

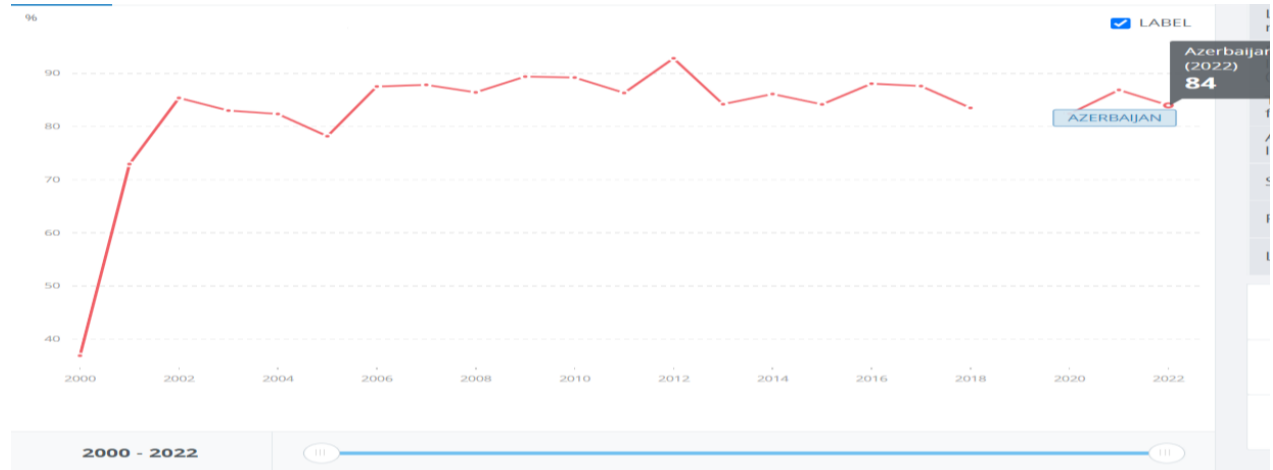
According to SSC's answer dated May 27, 2024, number 3-34/2-281/02-2/2024, to my request dated May 22, 2024, in 2023, those who received training in preschool educational institutions and 3-5-year-old children involved in pre-school training in general education schools accounted for 49.1% of the total number of 3-5-year-old children in the country, and among them, girls accounted for 46.9%.

According to the "Law on General Education" (№ 1532-VQ, 2019) in Azerbaijan, primary and secondary education is considered general secondary education. Primary education covers grades 1-4, compulsory secondary education covers grades 5-9, and upper secondary education covers grades 10-11. According to the information provided by SSC, for the first quarter of 2024, 46.6% of those studying in general educational institutions (primary, secondary) in Azerbaijan are girls (SSC, 2024).

Picture 2 shows the percentage of girls studying in general secondary education schools of Azerbaijan during the years 2000-2022 who studied up to the 11th grade, i.e. received full secondary education (World Bank, n.d. (b)).

Picture 2. Lower secondary completion rate, female (% of relevant age group) – Azerbaijan

Source: World Bank. Data/ Lower secondary completion rate, female (% of relevant age group) – Azerbaijan/2000-2022



Early marriages are one of the factors that cause fluctuations in the indicators and still do not reach the maximum results. In the picture below, it is possible to see the statistics of adolescent fertility in Azerbaijan during the years 2000-2021. It is unfortunate that the rates for adolescent fertility have fluctuated around 40% in recent times (World Bank, n.d. (c)).

Picture 3. Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19) – Azerbaijan

Source: World Bank. Data/ Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19) – Azerbaijan/2000-2021



Early marriages take place in more regions, but it is gratifying that there are also regions where girls are the majority of students who have completed secondary education and are admitted to higher education. (See: Table 2)

Table 2. Gender distribution of students who were admitted to higher educational institutions in 2022 by cities and regions of the RA (in percentage)

Source: SSC. 2022. Education, Science, Culture Data. Baku.

<i>Regions/Economic zones</i>	<i>Gender</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Baku</i>	54.8	45.2
<i>Lankaran-Astara</i>	54.7	45.3
<i>Quba - Khachmaz</i>	44.6	55.4
<i>Shaki-Zakatala</i>	49.2	50.8
<i>Ganja - Dashkasan</i>	46.9	53.1
<i>Qazax-Tovuz</i>	51.5	48.5
<i>Central Aran</i>	47.5	52.5

Secondary specialization education (college) trains students based on labor market demand, including those who have completed compulsory or upper secondary education (Decision №76 & 1.2, 2010). As of early 2024, 62.5 % of students in these institutions are girls (SSC, 2024), due to limited access to higher education. The most common field chosen by girls is nursing.

Vocational education institutions train qualified workers in various professions on the basis of general secondary education and upper secondary education, according to the demand of the labor market (Law № 1071-VQ & 1.0.16, 2018). Traditionally, vocational fields required physical strength, but from 2021, new specialties like cosmetologist, fashion designer, masseuse, nanny were introduced (Decision № 178, 2011). Currently, 6,931 women are enrolled in vocational education for the 2023-2024 academic year, a 10% increase compared to previous years (Azertac, 2023).

The purpose of higher education is to train highly qualified specialists, scientific and scientific-pedagogical personnel in various specialties (specializations), taking into account the needs of society and the labor market at the higher education level (Decision № 75 & 1.2, 2010). There are 3 levels of higher education: bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral degree.

According to the information provided by the SSC, half of the students studying at all three levels of higher education for the first quarter of 2024 are girls (SSC, 2024).

General secondary and higher education institutions in Azerbaijan operate both under the state and private. BSU, operating under MSE, has signed a first in the field of gender equality in education. Although gender issues are currently being taught in a number of higher education institutions, BSU was the first university to apply gender issues to education. In 1999, gender discipline was taught at the "Social Sciences and Psychology" faculty. Later, the "Gender and applied psychology" department was established at the University. Currently, the introduction to Gender subject is taught in 11 faculties of the University, in 22 specialties (Nabiyeva, 2010).

Indicators for gender equality in education vary not only among learners, but also among teachers and management staff. This is due to the existing gender stereotypes in the country and the amount

of teachers' salaries. So, according to existing gender stereotypes, the "ideal" profession for women is teaching. For men, the "ideal" jobs are related to professional technical fields and professions that require physical strength. This can be seen from the following statistics:

Table 3: Distribution of students enrolled in state higher educational institutions based on their chosen fields of study at the start of the 2022/2023 academic year (%).

Source: SSC. 2023. Gender indicators. Women and men in Azerbaijan. Educational and scientific personnel

Field of study	Women	Men
Education	80.9	19.1
Humanitarian and social	52.6	47.4
Culture and art	64.4	35.6
Economics and management	39.6	60.4
Natural sciences	61.1	38.9
Technical and technological	26.6	73.4
Agriculture	30	70
Health, welfare services	39.1	60.9
Total	48.8	51.2

It should be noted that compared to the 2019/2020 academic year, the percentage of women's representation in education, culture and art, economics and management, technical and technological increased, while a decrease was observed in other areas. (for comparison see: [eu4genderhelpdesk_azerbaijangerprofile_v3.pdf](#))

On the other hand, the low salaries of teachers (pedagogical workers) are an obstacle for men to be directed towards education. According to the information provided by the Minister of Science and Education, Emin Amrullayev, after all teachers participate in the certification, their average monthly salary will be 910 AZN (493.78 Euros). Currently, teachers with an 8-hour teaching load receive a salary of 500 AZN (271.31 Euros). Due to the small number of children in rural areas, the teaching load of teachers is also low, therefore, teachers in those regions receive low salaries. In addition, due to the generally low income level of people in rural areas (the minimum wage in the country is 350 AZN (189.91 Euros).) cases of girls receiving paid higher education are not very common (Azerbaijani Teacher, 2023).

Male teachers are more often represented in leadership positions in educational institutions.

The effects of the above reasons can be seen from the following statistics.

Table 4: The ratio of teachers for the academic year 2022/2023 in state/non-state education institutions

Type of education institutions	Female teachers (%)	Male teachers (%)
Preschool education institutions	99.8	0.2
Primary education institutions	93.5	6.5
General secondary education and upper secondary education institutions	78	22
Vocational education institutions	69.2	30.8
Specialized secondary education institutions	81.3	18.7
Higher education institutions	57.4	42.6

Source: SSC. 2023. *Gender indicators. Women and men in Azerbaijan. Educational and scientific personnel*

For the 2022/2023 academic year, female principals are represented by 40%, male principals by 60%, female deputy principals by 61%, and male deputy principals by 39% (SSC, 2023).

5.1.3. Legislative Reforms for Gender Equality in Education in Azerbaijan

After Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, the reforms made in the legislative system were aimed at ensuring gender equality in various fields, including education.

The highest legal authority in Azerbaijan is the Constitution, adopted by referendum in 1995. Article 25 guarantees equality, stating that men and women have the same rights and freedoms. Article 42 guarantees every citizen the right to education and free compulsory general secondary education (Constitution, № 00 & 25, 42, 1995).

In the late 20th century, Azerbaijan reformed its national legislative system and undertook international obligations to promote gender equality. In 1995, Azerbaijan joined the UN's CEDAW and submits report every four years as required (Decision № 1074, 1995; UN, 1979). In 1998, an order was adopted to enhance women's roles in political, social, economic, and cultural life (Order № 727, 1998). In 2000, another order mandated equal representation of women in state administration (Order № 289, 2000).

The 2006 Law "On Guarantees of Gender Equality" defines gender discrimination, including sexual harassment and any preferential treatment limiting equal rights. It also outlines non-discriminatory measures, such as different retirement ages for men and women, and provisions for gender equality in education: equal opportunities in the exercise of the right to education and cases that can be considered discrimination based on gender in the activities of educational institutions (№ 150-IIIQ, 2006).

In 2006, Azerbaijan also adopted a law on the approval of the UN Convention on Combating Discrimination in the Field of Education (Law № 146-IIIQ, 2006).

In 2009, the Law "On Education" was adopted. In that law, it was stated that the state provides equal educational opportunities for women and men, and that topics related to gender equality are included in teaching materials at every level of education (Law № 833-IIIQ & 11.3 - 2, 2009)

Azerbaijan's gender equality policy is reflected in its national action plans. The "National Action Plan on Women's Issues" (2000-2005) aimed to create a "Women and Education" State Program, but none was found during the research (Decision № 33, 2000). Only in 2020, the National Action Plan "For 2020-2023 on the fight against domestic violence in the Republic of Azerbaijan" included plans to address domestic violence in education but did not mention the Istanbul Convention (Decision № 2307 & 12.2.7, 2020).

In 2015, Azerbaijan adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals Agenda and signed the 2021-2025 Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) in March 2021. The latest 2021 report proposed a National Action Plan for Gender Equality for 2021-2025, focusing on preventing gender stereotypes, supporting vulnerable women, and increasing women's work opportunities and decision-making roles. However this plan has not been yet adopted (RA, 2021).

In general, after the 2000-2005 National Action Plan, a number of draft action plans on gender equality were proposed, but not adopted.

In addition, one of the bases of the early marriage factor, which causes educational evasion, should be sought in the Family Code. Thus, according to Article 10 of the Family Code (1999), the age of marriage is set at 18 years, but if there are reasonable grounds, the age of marriage can be reduced by no more than 1 year. The gap in this article, i.e. the failure to mention what constitutes valid reasons, not only leads to the expansion of the circle of reasons, but also indirectly leads to an increase in the number of early marriages.

In the Criminal Code (1999), violating the right to equality and forcing a woman to marry (it is considered an aggravating circumstance when it is committed against minors) is described as a criminal act.

Summarizing the above, it can be concluded that activities to ensure gender equality in education in Azerbaijan should be carried out in 3 directions: 1. Students (Learners), 2. Education providers (Educators), 3. Educational content.

Research on learners and educators in Azerbaijan shows that underrepresentation in pre-school education hinders women from entering the workforce or holding leadership positions. After compulsory secondary education, fewer girls continue their studies, primarily due to early marriages and societal roles. Many parents believe secondary qualifications, like nursing, are sufficient for girls, leading to a majority of girls in secondary specialized institutions. Additionally, low minimum wages limit girls' opportunities for paid higher education. Few men enter teaching due to low salaries and gender stereotypes about suitable professions for men and women.

Gender-related changes in the teaching content, inclusion of gender subjects in teaching materials is a successful step. Doing it only in universities alone will not be successful. Therefore, the idea of changing the school curriculum in this direction should be viewed positively.

In addition to government institutions, NGOs also have a role in the field of gender equality in Azerbaijan. However, the fact that the activities of most NGOs are not actively spread in the regions still leads to the existence of gender stereotypes in remote areas, which is the main reason for the statistical indicators we have shown as an example above.

In Azerbaijan, NGOs have the authority to establish a Public Council in order to play the role of a bridge between the activities of state bodies and citizens. These Public Councils should exercise citizen control over the activities of state institutions. The importance of this authority should be instilled in the currently existing Public Councils, and formality should be avoided.

The lack of adoption of a national action plan on gender equality in Azerbaijan is one of the biggest gaps in the existing legislation in this field.

Another issue is that the Family Code does not limit the range of valid reasons for lowering the age of marriage, and how to control it in order to prevent early marriages.

The underrepresentation of women in management positions or the lack of certain qualifications is related to gender stereotypes. One reason for the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in education is the disproportionate distribution of household and care burdens. Although some measures have been taken to break gender stereotypes in Azerbaijan, which we will talk about in the next sub-question, it would be appropriate to add any provision on this to the Law on "Guarantees of Gender Equality".

Another reason for gender stereotypes are perpetuated is textbooks (as the example above makes clear). Therefore, as much as possible teaching materials should be re-examined and gender-sensitive language should be used in each one.

The evidence shows that early marriages, lack of women in leadership, and the minority of male teachers in some Azerbaijani regions are due to patriarchal norms, a key cause of gender inequality highlighted by critical feminism. True equality is unattainable without challenging these norms. Additionally, low incomes, intersectionality, and class factors prevent girls from accessing higher education, creating further inequality. The legislative system lacks sufficient laws promoting gender equality in education, confirming the argument that legal frameworks and policies underpin the gender hierarchy.

5.2. How are gender programmes in education of the EU adapted in the Azerbaijani context?

The EU enlargement proposal, first suggested by French President Georges Pompidou, aimed to extend EU benefits to neighboring countries, contingent on shared values. This process showed that Europe's borders are flexible, giving hope that non-European countries could join if they reformed. The EU prioritized relations with Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and South Caucasus countries due to their geographic and cooperative potential, and significant ties with Russia.

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Azerbaijan and the EU, signed in 1996 and effective from April 22, 1999, laid the foundation for their relations. In 2015, Azerbaijan proposed a Strategic Partnership Agreement, supported by the EU in early 2016. Negotiations for

a comprehensive agreement began in January 2017 and are ongoing (Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, 2022).

The policies of the EU regarding Azerbaijan are divided into 3 directions: 1. ENP; 2. EaP; 3. Energy security.

The ENP was formed in 2003 and became operational in 2004. That year, the European Commission recommended including Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the ENP (Wolff, n.d). This policy focuses on security and EU’s global role, emphasizing "cultural security" due to the EU’s limited military power. This shift was prompted by regional conflicts that demonstrated the need for non-military security measures (Hajiyeva, 2020). The ENP’s mission evolved to highlight shared security interests between the EU and southern neighbors. It recognizes that issues in neighboring countries can affect EU security, citing organized crime and international terrorism as outcomes of deeper problems like lack of freedom and economic opportunities in these regions. The ENP addresses these issues through institution-building, economic cooperation, and security collaboration in areas such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) (Wolff, n.d).

The EaP was created through a Joint Declaration adopted by the EU on May 7, 2009 to make ENP more effective for different regions. Its goal is to to enhance political and economic relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, to deepen both bilateral and multilateral relationships grounded in mutual commitments.

Azerbaijan participates in the EaP’s gender equality working groups, which regularly meet to discuss issues like gender pay gap, pension differences, workplace violence, gender-based violence. The most recent meeting, held in Brussels on May 30-31, included discussions on ratifying the Istanbul Convention and the ILO Convention 190 on workplace harassment and violence (European External Action Service, 2024).

Within the framework of The EaP, there are various programs and initiatives that focus on promoting gender equality in education in partner countries, including Azerbaijan. These can be listed as follows:

“EU4Gender Equality” Programme - Together against gender stereotypes and gender-based violence" (EU4GE) – The first phase of the programme has been declared in 2020 and implemented till 2023. This three-year regional initiative sought to promote equal rights and opportunities for both women and men by shifting social attitudes, challenging gender stereotypes, and increasing men's participation in unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks. As the first regional program dedicated to gender equality within the EaP countries, it was funded by the EU and jointly executed by UN Women and UNFPA, covering the partner countries.

This program involved government bodies, civil society organizations, the private sector, and individuals (women, men, girls, and boys) from these six countries. It utilized various strategies to drive social change and tackle structural gender barriers and norms. Key areas of focus included altering gender-stereotyped behaviors, boosting men's involvement in parenting and domestic

chores, and decreasing the number of violence victims through specific prevention measures targeting perpetrators.

In the first phase of this program, projects to promote gender equality in education were aimed at combating gender stereotypes in working conditions with fathers and religious communities in different regions. At the end of the three-year period, small grants were given to local grassroots organizations to support innovative and focused local projects. However, some of these projects did not align well with the overall goals of the Programme or the specific needs of the countries involved. Therefore, the recommendation for the next phase covers that programming resources should be reorganized to ensure they are allocated most effectively.

In addition, the interaction of stakeholders in partner countries can play an important role in ensuring policy transformation and spreading best practices. However, the result of the implementation of the program was that it was not possible to establish such mutual relations, especially in conflict countries (due to the Azerbaijan-Armenia war) (Calibrate Evaluation Team, 2023).

Although the pandemic and the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia delayed the implementation of the program in 2020, significant work has been done in 3 years. In order to promote gender equality in education in Azerbaijan, various projects have been implemented both with government organizations and NGOs within the framework of this program.

Some of them are projects implemented by RDPU. Thus, within the framework of this program, the "Promotion of Gender Sensitive Schools" project was created with the cooperation of RDPU and MSE. Within the framework of this project, round tables on various topics, numerous trainings for teachers and students were carried out. At one of the round tables held in 2022, a road map was prepared on the integration of educational resources developed on gender-oriented pedagogy into the educational curricula of higher and secondary educational institutions that train teachers (RDPU, 2022a).

Within the framework of the project, "Gender-oriented pedagogy" trainings were held in Baku, Ganja and Lankaran with the participation of about 400 teachers. The primary aim of the training sessions is to enhance the understanding of teachers in higher and general educational institutions regarding gender-sensitive pedagogy. These sessions aim to educate them about various aspects of an education system rooted in gender equality, while also bolstering their practical skills and competencies in this area. The trainings equip teachers with knowledge, techniques, and approaches related to gender-sensitive pedagogy, heightening their awareness of the significance of employing gender-sensitive methodologies. Such methodologies ensure the equal participation of both girls and boys in teaching and learning processes and emphasize the importance of tailoring classroom environments to meet the needs of all students, regardless of gender (RDPU, 2022b).

Within the framework of this project, social theater trainings on "Gender-based stereotypes in the school environment" were held among more than 500 students in those 3 regions. In this regard, drawing competition "Gender equality through the eyes of students" was organized, which will attract the interest of students, and each student tried to show the school environment based on gender equality through drawing. Also, meetings on "Choose your profession" were organized

with children aged 12-17. This type of meeting is aimed at eliminating gender stereotypes during the choice of profession/specialty (RDPU, 2022c).

Gender Hub Azerbaijan is one of the executive organizations actively operating within the framework of the EU4Ge program. Within the framework of the program, this organization has implemented "Responsible Fatherhood" trainings in Khachmaz and Imishli regions. These trainings were guided by other topics such as gender stereotypes and social norms from the aspect of gender equality in education, responsible fatherhood within the framework of patriarchal norms and beliefs, and the influence of family relationships on gender discrimination (Gender Hub Azerbaijan, n.d).

In accordance with the recommendations of the EU, scholarship programs have started to be announced in Azerbaijan for the development of non-traditional fields of education and the digital sector. One of them is the scholarship program announced by the "Girls Code Azerbaijan" platform. In 2023, 10 girls who got the right to study pre-coding modules completely free of charge completed their education under this program (Girls Code Azerbaijan. (n.d.).

Another is the Parla scholarship program, which was introduced in 2024 by the Education Development Fund. 50 female students were selected as winners within the framework of the scholarship program. In addition to monthly stipends, students selected within the program were offered comprehensive programs such as an internship program, mentorship, access to programs from world-leading universities, and LinkedIn learning tools (Education Development Fund, 2024).

The DigitALL project implemented by Gender Hub Azerbaijan in this direction can be cited as an example. Thus, this project aimed to instill the basics of offering girls educational paths and innovative projects in technical fields, programming and engineering (Gender Hub Azerbaijan, n.d.).

In 2022, the project "Promoting a gender-oriented approach in general education" was implemented in cooperation with IE within the framework of the EU4GE Equality program. Within the framework of the project, it is planned to increase the ability of 60 textbook authors to compile content on gender equality for the general education level, to promote a systematic and comprehensive gender-sensitive approach in those institutions through training and meetings with pedagogical and administrative staff, parents/guardians and students in 10 pilot schools. At the initial stage of the project, 7 textbooks were checked in order to ensure the promotion of the gender equality approach in the preparation of textbook sets. In addition, gender issues were integrated into School Development Plans prepared by IE for 10 schools (UNFPA Azerbaijan, 2022).

Another project implemented within the framework of the EU4GE program was carried out in cooperation with the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology. Within the framework of cooperation, training and information sessions were held for about 100 students of the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology. This collaboration aimed to increase gender-transformative skills to strengthen the participation of religious community representatives in activities aimed at preventing gender stereotypes and discrimination (Azertac, 2021).

The 2nd phase of the EU4GE program was announced in January 2024 and is planned to be implemented by July 2026.

EU4Youth Programme: This program was launched in 2017 and aims to strengthen the active participation of young people in partner countries. This initiative is committed to enhancing investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship, and employability, while also encouraging their active participation in democratic processes and the workforce. The program prioritizes support for disadvantaged youth, with a strong emphasis on promoting gender equality and empowering women. It has 3 pillars: 1. education and employability; 2. Entrepreneurship; 3. Engagement and empowerment (EU NeighboursEast, 2023a). From the point of view of gender equality, the education pillar assumes that women acquire the necessary knowledge to be represented equally with men in the labor market. However, the interesting point is that although education is one of the program's priorities, most of the projects implemented within the program are related to entrepreneurship. As one of the steps taken in relation to education, the College of Europe provides scholarships for studying abroad to partner countries, including Azerbaijani students.

Erasmus+ Programme: Gender equality in education is implemented in 3 directions within the Erasmus plus program. One of them is Erasmus Youth Exchange. Within the framework of this program, a number of higher education institutions of Azerbaijan cooperate with universities in Europe and carry out student exchange. Another direction is Erasmus plus training courses. Within this program, citizens of Azerbaijan can participate in training courses held abroad. The latest direction is the Erasmus Mundus Joint Degree Scholarship for students to study abroad. The success stories shared from the programs held in all 3 directions are aimed at increasing the interest of girls (Erasmus+, n.d.).

As we mentioned in the theory part, according to Ioannou & Kentas (2012), policy adaptation can manifest itself in two ways: normative adaptation means adaptation within the legislative framework and cognitive adaptation means understanding and attitudes of people, actual practices.

Since Azerbaijan is not a member of the EU, the legislative acts of the EU are not binding for Azerbaijan. However, since Azerbaijan is a part of the EU cooperation policy, it should aim to adapt its legislation to its advisory acts and standards. In addition to the legislative acts that we indicated in response to the first sub-question, Azerbaijan has also adopted legislative acts that aim to reach or adapt to European standards. For example, in 2008, an Order (№ 2643) was adopted to take measures related to the integration of higher education institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan into the European higher education space. In this Order, the relevant bodies were instructed to prepare the State Program for reforms in the higher education system of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, in the prepared State Program, no provision was found for ensuring gender equality, taking into account the gender factor in the content of training, staff training, and management of the education system.

In 2015, the Action Plan (№ 995, 2015) for the implementation of the "State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan" was approved. The gender factor was not found in this Plan either

In addition, the Council of Europe has prepared an Action Plan for Azerbaijan during 2018-2021. In that Plan, it is planned to provide technical assistance to promote the signing of the Istanbul Convention by Azerbaijan, to take measures to provide expertise to the SCFWCA and the Ministry of Justice in order to change the existing legislation according to the standards of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2018).

It is known that one of the reasons why women cannot be represented in leadership positions in educational institutions is family concerns and the small number of pre-school educational institutions for children. In order to solve this problem, it is noted in the "Azerbaijan 2020: Looking to the Future" Development Concept approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on December 29, 2012, that by 2020, the level of participation of young children in preschool education across the country will be brought to the level of the average European indicator, for this purpose, the expansion of the network of state kindergartens, along with the improvement of conditions and supplies, measures will be implemented to support the creation and operation of preschool educational institutions belonging to different forms of ownership (municipal, community, private, family kindergartens) (Decree №800 & 7.2, 2012).

Currently, as a continuation of this, we are facing another deficiency. As can be seen from the answer to the first sub-question, the specific weight of 3-5-year-old children involved in preschool training in the total number of 3-5-year-old children in the country is 49.1%.

The lack of necessary action plans, the lack of reflection of gender issues in the existing plans revealed above that normative policy adaptation is somewhat weak. For this, in addition to the adoption of the aforementioned legislative acts, the provisions mentioned in the Recommendation "Gender mainstreaming in education" adopted by the Council of Europe in 2007 can be taken into account. For example, it is clear that the integration of gender issues into textbooks is a long process, therefore, during this phase, MSE can also prepare guidelines for schools, teachers, and curriculum planners on how to include gender equality in their work.

Furthermore, it is important to develop school development plans for at least 10 schools in each region, and to promote preschool education in remote areas to ensure greater representation of women in the education sector.

Considering that lawyers are one of the main figures in the process of ensuring gender equality, intersectionality and multi-component discrimination should be added not only to the curriculum of higher education institutions that prepare teachers, but also to the curriculum of law schools, the language that may lead gender stereotypes, prejudices must also be critically scrutinized.

5.3. What are the opinions of stakeholders on Azerbaijan-EU relations in the direction of gender equality in education?

It is possible to identify various stakeholders within the framework of cooperation with the EU in Azerbaijan. Governmental organizations such as MSE, SCFWCA, NGOs, school/university teachers/leaders, EU representations in Azerbaijan are considered to be the main stakeholders in the direction of promoting gender equality in the field of education. In this question, the results of the interviews and survey conducted to learn the opinions of those stakeholders about this

cooperation are summarized. As a result of generalization, the following categories were defined: *Perception; Collaborations; Challenges; Solutions; Future Outlook.*

According to the general result of the interviews, each interviewee is aware of the EU-funded projects implemented in the direction of promoting gender equality in education. Taking into account that the organizations represented by 4 interviewees cooperate with the EU, questions about these projects and their effectiveness were asked in the Collaboration part. According to interviewee 4, colleagues in the organization she represents are preparing podcasts on their own initiative to raise awareness about EU-funded projects.

Perception: According to the interviewees, the level of awareness in this aspect in the country is not encouraging. Each interviewee mentioned different reasons for this. For example, according to Interviewee 3, gender equality in education and EU-funded projects in other areas are rarely promoted among the population. He notes that a number of organizations implementing such projects across the country have their own "bubbles" and the same people are constantly participating in such events, so very little information leaks out. On the other hand, the population has no interest in researching, learning, and closely following the process.

According to Interviewee 1, since 2016, EU NeighboursEast has been conducting a survey every year to study the awareness of the EU's financial support and the perception of the effectiveness of this support. According to the results of this survey conducted in 2023, a 4% (36%-40%) increase has been noticed in awareness of the EU's financial support since 2016. The perception of informed persons about the effectiveness of this support is as follows: 25% - effective support, 11% - not effective support, 4% - don't know (EU NeighboursEast, 2023b).

According to Interviewee 2, the level of awareness in Azerbaijan not only about EU projects related to gender equality in education, but also about the EU, as well as about the work of international organizations is very low. Many people still do not know whether Azerbaijan is a member of the EU, the difference between the EU and the Council of Europe, and how the EU implements projects in Azerbaijan. Political reasons are also at the root of this, as cooperation with the EU at the government level is not widespread, which also affects low awareness.

Interviewee 4 notes that the level of awareness in the country also depends on the level of people's intelligence. For example, although this awareness is lower at the school level, it can be seen that the difference is slightly reduced at the university level.

Interviewee 5 clarified how the projects are carried out by the organization she represents to increase awareness. She noted that, first of all, surveys are conducted in each region on this topic, trainings are started in regions showing a lower percentage according to the results of that survey. In addition, taking into account that there are 12 regional education departments in Azerbaijan, holding such trainings in each region means reaching a certain number of education workers from each district located in that region. Interviewee 5 stated with regret that this project was held in Azerbaijan, but it was left unfinished.

Collaboration: According to some of the interviewees, the organizations they represent have implemented some EU initiatives in the field of gender equality in education, including various

projects, trainings, and holding public sessions. According to the Interviewee 1, the held public sessions were related to the topics of education in the field of gender, breaking the stereotypes. It has been emphasized that such events have been held every March since 2017 on the occasion of International Women's Day. According to the interviewee, these EU-funded projects aim to increase the role of women in male-dominated fields. In addition, Interviewee 1 mentioned that the representatives of the organization she represents go to rural schools and organize meetings with girls and encourage them to apply for the IT field, and regularly hold info-sessions among young students about EU-funded scholarships. Based on the information provided by Interviewee 1, it was found that an EU-funded training called "Confronting bullying" was implemented among teachers. One of the notable disappointments of the training was that the participants consisted of only female teachers.

Based on the information provided by Interviewee 2, the EU also implements projects in cooperation with the Council of Europe. An example of this is the Partnership for Good Governance program. This program is funded by the EU and consists of 4 projects, one of which is related to domestic violence and is implemented by the Baku office of the Council of Europe, but none of these projects is exclusively aimed at promoting gender equality in education.

Interviewee 3 also states that although the organization he represents actively promotes gender equality, it has not been the executor of EU-funded projects related to gender equality in education. In addition, in general, the Papa's School 1-year project funded by the EU in the direction of promoting gender equality, as well as trainings were organized among lawyer and police students in the direction of promoting gender equality. The active participants of these trainings were sent on an educational trip to Geneva, the UN headquarters within the framework of EU funding.

Interviewee 5 divided the projects implemented by the organization she represented in the framework of cooperation with the EU into 3 groups and noted that these projects aimed to conduct positive work with educators and students and improve the educational curriculum in this direction. Training of trainers, meetings with students and their parents, as well as examination of educational materials are among the works carried out in this direction.

According to Interviewee 1, who is an executor of projects within the framework of gender equality in education, the main result of cooperation with the EU in this field is the increase in the number of male participants in such projects year by year, attracting their interest. On the other hand, one of the effects is using the power of social media. In order to promote EU projects in Azerbaijan, collaborations are made with influencers and thus it is possible to reach a wide audience.

Interviewee 5 stated the necessary steps to be taken to see the impact of these projects. She noted that for this, the success stories of people from those regions should be shown to people, as well as the promotion power of social media should be used.

Challenges:

The education system in Azerbaijan does not have a gender-based approach and a number of fields are extremely male-dominated. For example, Interviewee 1 shared her personal experience and noted that female students sent for internships in technical fields, especially in the field of oil-gas

engineering, are not adequately provided with safe clothing, as the available helmets, boots, etc. The size of safety equipment is usually large. This is an indication that the education system is not gender sensitive to such areas.

Another reason related to the activities of educational institutions is the issue of affordable housing. Most of the universities in the country are located in the capital, which leads to students being away from their families when the academic year starts. While it is easy for boys to get permission from the family for this, it is not so easy for girls. Therefore, MSE and its subordinate institutions should increase and promote the number of affordable housing and dormitories for girls.

Another main reason is early marriages. This has become widespread and has become a culture in the southern regions of Azerbaijan and other remote areas. In this zone, it is not very important for girls to get higher education and financial freedom, even if girls do not get married after compulsory education, according to Interviewee 3, it becomes a matter of honor, so they are married off as soon as they turn 17 or even earlier.

The main reason for not achieving the desired result in the field of gender equality in education is the lack of interest of men in this field. There is an opinion formed in the society that only women should protect women's rights. This trend can also be seen in the fact that there are few male teachers in the field of education. Men are burdened with the responsibility of managing the family and the low salaries of teachers prevent men from choosing this profession. This reason also leads to certain stigmas, only women come to mind when you say teacher, which shows the gap in mental values existing in the society.

Interviewee 3 also touched on the issue of the lack of representation of women in leadership positions and indicated gender blindness as the main reason for this. According to this approach, the presence of women in the eyes of others does not matter. Even citing several examples from his own experience, he stated that gender blindness is caused by men being jealous of the possibility of women being successful individuals.

In the end, it was emphasized that the root of these problems is the level of intellect of the society. According to Interviewee 4, when the new generation is at the age of their parents, about 30 years later, we can hope that these problems will gradually decrease.

Solutions: The next question was about the effectiveness of the EU's efforts in overcoming these problems. According to the majority of interviewees, EU solutions can be effective in solving these problems, because not all EU countries have reached the desired results in this area, for example, in Eastern European countries such as Poland and Hungary, no desired results have been achieved in terms of gender equality. However, the EU's efforts in this direction, the development indicators achieved in those countries can serve as a benchmark for Azerbaijan and lead to cultural exchange. Not only the European countries, but also the projects conducted in other post-Soviet countries (Georgia, Moldova, Armenia) and the results obtained give hope for Azerbaijan to believe that the efforts of the EU will be effective in eliminating these problems.

Interviewee 3 explained why the efforts of the EU are currently not effective in eliminating these problems. According to him, EU involvement in Azerbaijan is very low not only in the field of

gender in education, but also in other fields. This is due to political reasons. If the EU applies for financing and implementing any project in Azerbaijan, it must go through various bureaucratic processes and obtain permission from a large number of institutions. This reduces the effectiveness of the EU's efforts. On the other hand, the fact that EU-funded projects are treated with indifference by government organizations and that they do not contribute anything other than the appearance of their logo in the project is one of the factors affecting the effectiveness.

Future Outlook: The last question of the interview was about the long-term effects of EU-Azerbaijan collaboration. According to the interviewees, the long-term effect of this cooperation in the field of education will result in the representation of women in the decision-making process. This is also the view that stakeholders want to see. According to them, women should be more represented in the fields that determine the country's destiny, for example, in politics, the army, the police, the legal field, etc. According to the stakeholders, to see the long-term effects, from top to bottom should be taken as the main principle.

Also, Interviewee 2 emphasized that in order to see such long-term effects, first of all, the legislation should be changed, and it is necessary to prepare a state strategy on gender equality in education.

Interviewee 3 also notes that long-term effects are not expected at the moment, because EU-funded projects in Azerbaijan are short-term and the main goal is simply to implement the project, and its result is not very interesting. Interviewee 3 likens this process to the "hot potato game". Unlike other partner countries, the EU does not envisage long-term projects for Azerbaijan, because the EU is not sure how these cooperation relations will change "one year" from now. On the other hand, there is little trust in NGOs from the EU side in Azerbaijan, and the reason for this was the negative reports written about Azerbaijani NGOs regarding the use of funds allocated by the EU in 2013-2014.

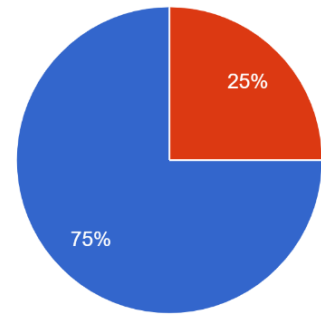
Interviewee 5 emphasized the need for a long time to see the impact of cooperation with the EU. For example, it is necessary to observe this process for 4-5 years in order to clarify to what extent the improvement of educational materials affects the students. However, because of the overall positive experience, Interviewee 5 believes that this cooperation will be effective.

The general conclusion of the interviewees is that in order for EU efforts to have a long-term impact, the state side should also be interested and actively involved in this process. The events should be nationwide so that they are taken seriously and reach more people.

Qualitative research on this thesis continues with the analysis of the survey results. In the data analysis part, the demographic indicators of the teachers who participated in the survey were analyzed.

One of the survey questions aimed to find out awareness of any EU initiatives or programs aimed at promoting gender equality in education in Azerbaijan.

75% of the participants stated that they are aware of these projects. As a source of information about the projects, it was noted that it was mostly obtained from the media, colleagues, and school management.



Another question related to the assessment of the overall impact of EU initiatives on promoting gender equality in education. According to the results of the survey, 59.3% evaluated this effect as positive, 26.4% as neutral, 9.9% as very positive, 3.3% as negative, and 1.1% as very negative.

93.5% of the teachers who participated in the survey did not participate in EU-funded projects in this field, and 85.9% said that no program to promote gender equality was implemented in their schools.

Survey participants were asked what are the main challenges in implementing EU-supported gender equality initiatives in education in the schools where they are teachers. In response to this question, half of the participants emphasized “the lack of resources” and “mental values”, 22 people selected “lack of administrative support”, 15 people emphasized “insufficient training”, and 1 person stressed that there are difficulties such as “low salary”. Only one of the survey participants stated as follows:

“There is no need for EU support, and there is sufficient equality in education”.

Based on the survey responses, the teachers' conclusion is that the areas that need more attention or resources from the EU to better promote gender equality in education in Azerbaijan include strengthening relations with the parent community, developing new programs for students, and teacher training and development. In other words, about 46-50% of the survey participants think that the resources should be spent on the students and teachers. Some of the rest think that it is important to make changes in the content of education, that is, the curriculum, while another part thinks that it is important to develop the infrastructure and ensure the availability of resources.

Summarizing the results, it can be noted that the stakeholders associate the effective outcome of EU-Azerbaijan cooperation with certain conditions, the first of which is state support. Currently, the involvement of the EU in the field of gender equality in education is very weak due to the lack of support for political reasons. The national level of the implemented projects, the enthusiasm of the relevant government bodies in this work can lead to further strengthening of these relations, as well as ensure that the obtained results are long-term. Critical feminist view that state structures and political dynamics play a crucial role in either perpetuating or challenging gender inequalities. The lack of EU involvement due to political reasons illustrates how power dynamics at the political level can hinder progress in gender equality initiatives. Besides this, effective change requires not just policies but also the active participation and support of those in power. Enthusiastic government bodies can challenge existing patriarchal structures and facilitate sustainable gender

equality in education. Moreover, the long-term results reflect the critical feminist theory's focus on systemic change.

On the other hand, as a result of the conducted survey, it was concluded that teachers are not sufficiently informed about EU efforts in the field of promoting gender equality in education and do not apply it in their teaching methods. One of the reasons for this is the lack of financial motivation of teachers and their ignorance of positive experiences. Moreover, these cooperation projects should not only be aimed at the professional development of the curriculum and teachers, but should also be aimed at raising awareness among parents, improving the resources and school infrastructure that ensure equal access to education.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of conducting this study was to investigate how EU-Azerbaijan relations affect gender equality in education in Azerbaijan. The main research question was as follows:

How does EU gender partnership impact the promotion of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan?

In order to find an answer to this question, the steps taken in the field of gender equality in Azerbaijan, changes in legislation, how the EU gender equality programs are implemented in Azerbaijan and the opinions of stakeholders were investigated.

As a result of my research, my findings can be divided into 3 directions. Findings regarding educational attainment show that the level of representation of girls and boys varies according to each level of education. This also has a number of reasons and consequences. Early marriages, patterns that predetermine the social roles of girls and boys, and the low - income level of families are among the factors affecting this numerical equality. The numerical equality of educators is also due to the gender of specialties and professions, and the low salary of teachers. In addition to numerical equality, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of curriculum in schools. The earlier children learn gender-sensitive language, the more lasting and effective the results will be. On the other hand, the quality result requires not only working with school subjects, but also reforming the country's legislation and strengthening the supervisory function of NGOs are also important factors. These findings reflect how patriarchal norms and power dynamics discourage girls from continuing their education beyond the compulsory level, socioeconomic factors and societal expectations about gender roles influence both the choice of profession and the willingness to pursue higher positions within the educational sector. The need for curriculum reform and gender-sensitive teaching methods is also crucial. However, the success of these initiatives depends on the legislative support and policy enforcement.

Findings obtained while investigating how the EU gender equality programs are adapted in Azerbaijan showed that the EU does not directly implement a project in Azerbaijan, for this it cooperates with other international organizations that have a representative office in Azerbaijan, and they also negotiate with Azerbaijani NGOs and government bodies. It is because of the cautious approach of Azerbaijani state institutions towards EU cooperation that reflects underlying power dynamics and resistance to external influence on gender norms. Findings also show that the

normative adaptation of EU standards on gender in education is weak in the country, as evidenced by the lack of a strategy or national action plan on gender equality in education, and the lack of a gender approach in the existing strategy.

On the other hand, the conclusion of the experts in this field was that the state institutions in the country do not view cooperation with the EU very positively, while some NGOs think only about the formal side of it. Even the EU itself, unlike other post-Soviet countries, does not propose long-term projects in the process of cooperation with Azerbaijan, and the reason for this is that it is not sure how the process will continue in the coming years. If this is the case, it may be difficult to see the long-term effects of this cooperation. As Mohanty (2006) points out, this is due to the influence of western feminism, because the EU wants to apply the measures implemented in other post-Soviet countries or European countries in the same way, but because the socio-political and cultural situation of Azerbaijan does not allow this, the projects are not long-term, whereas if these cooperations are planned individually for each country, considering these factors in advance, it is possible to see successful results. In addition, teachers, who are the main subject in the teaching process, have little knowledge about the nature of cooperation with the EU. Therefore, they are unaware of the results of this cooperation, for example, the methods of integrating gender equality into the teaching methodology, which is at the heart of EU projects.

The above-mentioned findings helped to answer the main research question. So, on the basis of these findings, we can note that the projects carried out in Azerbaijan within the framework of EU cooperation in the field of gender equality in education, although small in scale, helped to check and change teaching materials, reach a certain number of teachers, and improve their teaching methods from the gender aspect. Despite these effects, the EU has not been able to have a wide-ranging impact on gender equality in education in Azerbaijan. The limited impacts of this cooperation are closely related to state policy, the extent of EU cooperation with government bodies, and national desire.

While reviewing the literature during the research, it became clear that although there are articles and textbooks written on the topic of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan, some of them reflect old statistics, and the suggestions mentioned in some of them have already been implemented. Also, there is no comprehensive study on EU-Azerbaijan relations in this direction. In this study, the situation in the field of gender equality in education in Azerbaijan was shown with new statistics, information was provided about the most recent projects, and the changes in the legislation were examined. In addition, the cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan in the field of gender equality in education was investigated using the case analysis method, and the opinions of stakeholders about the effectiveness of this cooperation were directly studied. In the study, as mentioned above, it also put forward suggestions for this cooperation to be more effective in the future.

During the research, the findings were reviewed in terms of a critical feminist theory which were mentioned in the theoretical section. The theory of liberal feminism states that girls and boys are socialized by family, school, media and others, that is, they are adapted to the appropriate gender roles. These stereotypes also prevent them from reaching their potential. As mentioned in the first chapter, these stereotypes are also connected with the fact that Azerbaijan has been in different

colonial regimes, especially under the influence of Islam for a long time. Critical feminist theory notes that power dynamics and the patriarchal regime should not be forgotten, either. Currently, in an era where more men are in leadership positions, there is gender blindness, and to eliminate all this, not only legal reforms, but also cultural norms and beliefs must change. Summarizing that, critical feminist theory considers power dynamics and patriarchal structures, socioeconomic factors, legislative reforms, policy frameworks as the main factors that influence gender equality, in this thesis, gender equality in education. Therefore, all the data were reviewed through these concepts, and finally, findings reflected it.

I encountered a number of challenges during my research. One of them was that I could not get accurate information about the completed projects. The same press release about any EU-funded project on gender equality in education is published on various websites, but information about the intended outcome of the project cannot be found on the website of the institution that implemented the project. In short, there are projects, but there is no access to data about the results of the project. Another limitation is related to the existing bureaucracy in government bodies and their accessibility. Time-consuming permissions to retrieve a simple piece of information make this process longer. Finally, finding interview participants was one of the most difficult parts of this research. Thus, due to the lack of publicly available information about gender equality experts, gender responsible persons, heads of such projects in the country, it was possible to find these persons only after several attempts through private channels.

Based on my findings, I can make the following suggestions for the research to make an important contribution.

After reviewing the teaching materials, it became clear that gender-sensitive language was not used in the textbooks. For this, the teaching materials should be updated, but considering that this is a long process, guidelines on the use of gender-sensitive teaching methods by teachers should be drawn up during this period of time, and questions should be asked about them in certification exams for teachers. It is necessary to prepare development plans for each of the schools and consider a gender-based approach in each.

Taking into account that NGOs are the main executors of the projects implemented in Azerbaijan within the framework of cooperation with the EU, it is possible to activate their activities in the regions and facilitate the process of granting to NGOs.

There is more work to be done within the framework of the legislation. As highlighted above, an overall strategy or national action plan covering gender equality in education should be adopted. The provision on breaking gender stereotypes should be reflected in existing legislative acts on gender equality. In addition, in order to prevent early marriages, which are one of the main causes of this inequality, the provision that the age of marriage can be reduced by 1 year in the Family Code should be abolished.

In order to avoid gender discrimination in the selection of specializations and to break the stereotypes, girls can be offered scholarships by the state to choose technical fields.

In addition, in order to create conditions for the representation of women in leadership positions in education, pre-school education should be promoted in the country, it should take the role of compulsory education not only for 5-year-old children, but also for 3-5-year-old children.

Finally, in order to see the benefits and long-term effects of EU-Azerbaijan cooperation in the field of gender equality in education, the full support of the state should not be spared.

Despite the limitations mentioned above, the findings obtained as a result of the research will serve as a base for those who will conduct research in this field in the future. So, the authors will be able to follow the latest situation in the country through this research and easily compare it with the period of their research. Also, the proposed recommendations will come to the aid of citizens or institutions that use the right of legislative initiative by applying to the Parliament of the RA. In addition, some of my interviewees indicated that they would read the results of my research and inform their representative organizations about the proposed recommendations. This is an indication that the research can contribute both to this study field and to practice.

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Table 5: Appendix I. Information about data sources and results

№	Data source	Results
1.	https://family.gov.az/az	Data about the projects implemented by SCFWCA
2.	https://edu.gov.az/ https://baku.edu.gov.az/ https://dp.edu.az/az/index	Data about the projects implemented by MSE and the number of educational institutions and education levels Statistical data on the number of girls and boys studying abroad within the framework of the State Program
3.	https://ombudsman.az/	Data about the measures implemented by the Ombudsman institution in the field of gender equality
4.	https://riib.az/	Data about the measures implemented by RDPU in the framework of cooperation with the EU in the field of gender equality in education
5.	Gender Hub Azerbaijan's social media profile/ https://www.instagram.com/genderhubazerbaijan/	Data about measures implemented by Gender Hub Azerbaijan in the framework of cooperation with the EU and other institutions in the field of gender equality in education
6.	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator	Statistical data on girls' completion of secondary education and early births in Azerbaijan.
7.	https://e-qanun.az/	Data on the acts adopted for the improvement of domestic legislation in the field of gender equality in education

8.	https://www.stat.gov.az/source/education/?lang=az	Statistical data on students studying at each level of education across the country
9.	https://www.stat.gov.az/source/gender/	Statistical data on the chosen specialties and gender of students studying in educational institutions, as well as on women and men among managers
10	https://azerbaijan.un.org/en	Data on the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the report submitted by Azerbaijan.