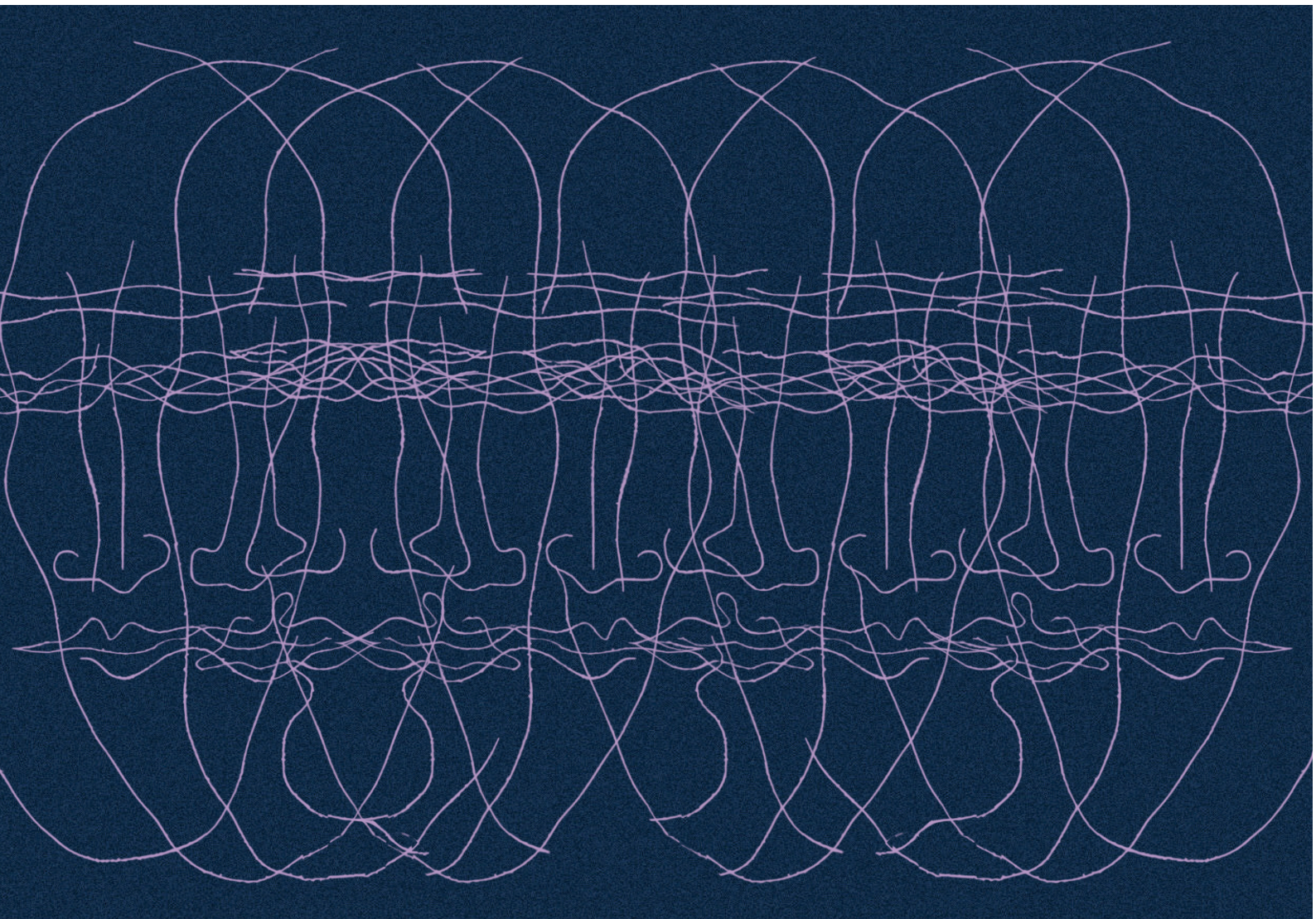


INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF GENDER, KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL FUTURES

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The *International Journal of Gender Knowledge and Social Futures (IJGKSF)* is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal dedicated to advancing high-quality interdisciplinary research on gender, social transformation, and inclusive development. Hosted by the Women Researchers Council (WRC) at the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), the journal provides a platform for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to explore how gender shapes institutions, policies, and societies in a rapidly changing world. IJGKSF emphasizes rigorous theoretical frameworks as well as empirical research that offers actionable insights for governance, social interventions, and sustainable development.

- The scope of the journal includes the following, but is not necessarily restricted to:
- Gender and social transformation within political, economic, and social institutions
- Gendered dimensions of knowledge production, innovation systems, and structural inequalities
- Gender perspectives in economics, education, governance, and public policy
- Social futures, sustainability, and pathways toward inclusive and equitable development
- Interdisciplinary and comparative approaches to gender, power, and society
- Gender-responsive governance, institutional reform, and development strategies
- Intersectional analyses of inequality across regions, identities, and social groups

IJGKSF welcomes original research articles, review papers, and policy-oriented analyses employing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. All submissions undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process to ensure academic excellence and relevance to the field of gender studies, social sciences, and interdisciplinary research.

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FOREWORD

The publication of the first volume of the *International Journal of Gender, Knowledge, and Social Features* represents an important institutional and intellectual milestone for the Women Researchers Council (WRC) of the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC). As the first international academic journal in Azerbaijan dedicated specifically to gender studies and their socio-economic and cultural dimensions, this volume establishes a structured scholarly platform for critical inquiry into the role of women in contemporary society.

This inaugural issue is devoted to the theme of sustainable socio-economic development of women within the community and the nation-state. The focus reflects a central premise: sustainable development cannot be achieved without the full and effective participation of women in economic, academic, scientific, and social life. Gender equality is not treated here as a symbolic objective, but as a structural component of national development, institutional transformation, and community resilience. In this regard, the journal aims to move beyond descriptive accounts and instead encourage analytical, evidence-based research that examines the mechanisms, policies, and socio-cultural frameworks shaping women's participation and leadership. The core idea of the journal is grounded in transformation - scientific, economic, cultural, and social. Gender studies today require interdisciplinary and context-sensitive approaches capable of addressing complex societal transitions. The journal therefore welcomes contributions from diverse fields including economics, sociology, political science, education, management, public policy, and cultural studies.

A key analytical concern of this publication is the relationship between knowledge production and social transformation. Universities and research institutions play a decisive role in shaping discourse, policy, and practice. Strengthening women's representation and leadership within these institutions is not only a matter of equity, but also a determinant of innovation capacity and sustainable growth. The journal seeks to contribute to this process by fostering high-quality scholarship that connects theoretical reflection with empirical evidence and policy implications. The first volume was presented during the I Women Researchers Council International Symposium – WRCIS2026 on 05 March, 2026 at Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) reflecting its broader mission to serve as a platform for academic dialogue and international cooperation. Through this initiative, the Women Researchers Council (WRC) affirms its commitment to expanding research networks, enhancing scholarly visibility, and promoting rigorous gender-focused research within Azerbaijan and beyond.

As an inaugural publication, this volume represents both an institutional beginning and a strategic direction. It establishes a foundation for sustained academic engagement with gender as a critical dimension of socio-economic development and community transformation. The Editorial Team expresses its appreciation to all authors, reviewers, and contributors whose scholarly efforts have shaped this first issue. We anticipate that the journal will continue to evolve as a dynamic forum for interdisciplinary research, contributing meaningfully to national and international debates on gender, knowledge, and social change.

Editorial Team

International Journal of Gender, Knowledge, and Social Features
Women Researchers Council (WRC)
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Gender and the Making of “Standard” Knowledge in the Karabakh Conflict Studies

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Abstract: Research on the Karabakh conflict has mainly focused on military dynamics, territorial negotiations, and regional power competition. Within this dominant literature, the social and gendered dimensions of war, such as displacement, household adaptation, and women’s roles in community survival have received comparatively limited systematic attention, despite their relevance to how the conflict has shaped everyday life since the early 1990s and after the 2020 war. This article examines gender inequality in how knowledge about the Karabakh conflict is produced and recognized. It argues that (1) research on gender is often treated as a secondary topic in conflict studies, and (2) even when such research exists, frequently written by women, it is less likely to become widely visible, cited, or used as a standard reference in the main literature on the conflict. To assess this, the study traces the development of gender-focused research over time and conducts a structured comparison of indexed publications using OpenAlex, showing how publication formats, indexing systems, and citation practices shape which studies become most discoverable and reusable. The findings indicate that the apparent scarcity of gender analysis in Karabakh scholarship is partly produced by academic visibility structures that privilege strategic analyses over research on displacement, social recovery, and everyday wartime adaptation.

Keywords: Gender bias, Karabakh conflict, citation gap, knowledge production, Armenia-Azerbaijan

1. Introduction

For nearly three decades, the status of Karabakh and surrounding districts remained unresolved following the first war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. During this period, these territories were under Armenian-backed control, while internationally they were recognized as part of Azerbaijan. The dispute generated recurring violence, prolonged displacement, and persistent instability, becoming one of the central security issues in the South Caucasus. In 2020, renewed large-scale hostilities significantly altered territorial control, with several districts coming under Azerbaijani administration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the scholarship on the Armenia–Azerbaijan relations, precisely, Karabakh conflict has developed primarily within a strategic and geopolitical analytical tradition. Foundational works, most notably Thomas de Waal’s *Black Garden*, established a widely adopted interpretive framework centered on diplomacy, interstate rivalry, military balance, and negotiation processes. Over time, this orientation has shaped expectations about what constitutes core conflict expertise and which types of studies are most likely to be treated as standard entry points into the literature.

Alongside this dominant trajectory, a separate but growing body of scholarship has examined the conflict through the lens of everyday wartime experience and social change. Research on displaced Azerbaijani women (Najafizadeh, 2013), practitioner-based field studies on women's security concerns and peace priorities (Kvinna till Kvinna 2019), and empirical analyses of women's daily survival, care work, and adaptation in war and post-war settings across the South Caucasus (Ziemer, 2020) have all demonstrated that gendered social processes are integral to how the Karabakh conflict has unfolded and been lived. Similarly, Claudia Ditel's study of women's agency in the Nagorno-Karabakh context highlights how grassroots initiatives and everyday practices can operate as informal confidence-building mechanisms that challenge militarized social environments.

Despite these contributions, the integration of such research into the central interpretive frameworks of the Karabakh conflict remains uneven. Gender-relevant studies on Karabakh are often produced by women scholars or by practitioners working closely with affected communities, but they tend to circulate through interdisciplinary journals, edited volumes, or policy-oriented venues rather than through the core conflict-security outlets that shape standard reference lists. This raises a broader question about how conflict knowledge is organized and evaluated within the field: why do some strands of Karabakh research become routine reference points, while others circulate mainly in specialized, interdisciplinary, or practitioner-oriented venues?

This article argues that the apparent scarcity of gender scholarship in Karabakh conflict studies is not primarily an intellectual absence, but a structural visibility distortion shaped by citation hierarchies, publication formats, and indexing infrastructures. Because discoverability strongly conditions what is routinely read, taught, and reused, these visibility structures can also influence which problem-definitions become "standard" in the field and which remain treated as supplementary. The article makes three contributions: (1) it conceptualizes the Karabakh field's "standard knowledge" as an outcome of gendered recognition mechanisms rather than topic relevance alone; (2) it maps how gender-relevant work on Karabakh circulates across formats and venues that are less likely to become canonical entry points; and (3) it provides bibliometric evidence from the OpenAlex database, comparing general conflict publications with those classified under gender-related topics, to show how indexing systems and search classifications make some types of research far more visible and reusable than others. It further links these visibility patterns to downstream effects in curricula, policy framing, post-war framing and mediation narratives, without implying intentional "ignoring," but rather unequal positioning of gendered perspectives as structuring lenses.

2. Strategic Bias in Conflict Studies and Its Effects on Gender Research

Research on armed conflict and security has generated a substantial body of academic and policy-oriented literature, yet this literature has developed within a knowledge environment that systematically privileges particular subjects, methods, and authorial profiles. Analyses of military strategy, territorial integrity, interstate dynamics, military capabilities, and great-power involvement have dominated the field. By contrast, social and gender-sensitive perspectives have remained marginal. This imbalance reflects not a lack of gender relevance to conflict dynamics, but a broader epistemic hierarchy embedded in conflict and security studies.

Empirical mappings of research agendas in leading conflict and security journals show that gender-sensitive analysis constitutes only a small minority of publications and is rarely treated as a primary analytical framework. A large-scale review of articles published in the *Journal of Peace Research* and comparable conflict journals finds that gender appears infrequently as a core variable in studies of war and armed conflict, despite the civilian and social character of many contemporary conflicts (Melander, 2005, p. 2). Similarly, systematic assessments of security studies show a persistent prioritization of “hard security” themes, especially military force over gendered dimensions of conflict. In their account of international security studies, Buzan and Hansen illustrate this trajectory as well by explicitly noting the later inclusion of feminist approaches in the field of international relations (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 135).

Using data from the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) project on peer-reviewed publications between 1980 and 2006, it has been observed that women constitute approximately 25–30% of authors publishing in leading International Relations journals. Yet their work receives significantly fewer citations than comparable male-authored research, even when controlling for journal rank, methodology, and topic area (Maliniak et al., 2013). Citation gaps of roughly 30–40% have also been identified across political science subfields, indicating that reputational authority accumulates unevenly and systematically along gender lines (Dion et al., 2018).

These patterns are supported by bibliometric analyses of core IR journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. They show that women-authored articles are underrepresented among the most highly cited publications and are less likely to be assigned as foundational readings in graduate-level syllabi. Importantly, gendered citation patterns cannot be understood independently of the institutional environments in which knowledge is produced. Editorial leadership and board composition matter because they signal what kinds of scholarship are treated as central and field-defining. In political science, the gender distribution of editorial positions often mirrors the gender composition of the subfields that govern particular journals, thereby reinforcing existing epistemic hierarchies (Dion et al., 2018).

If we speak in numbers, between 2007 and 2017, the *American Political Science Review* (APSR), the discipline’s flagship journal, was consistently led by male editors. Although women constituted between 25% and 67% of associate or co-editors in particular years, the journal had no female editor-in-chief during this period. Across the same decade, APSR’s Editorial Board was 36–43% female, broadly reflecting overall APSA membership. In 2017 specifically, APSR again had a male editor, with women comprising 33% of associate editors and 67% of editorial board members. This illustrates a pattern in which women become more visible in advisory roles than in ultimate gatekeeping positions (Dion et al., 2018).

A different case emerges in Political Analysis (PA), governed by the Political Methodology section (Polmeth), one of the most male-dominated areas of the discipline. Since 2007, PA has had only one female editor, and that appointment occurred within a shared editorial team rather than a sole editorship. Typically, just one of three or four associate editors is a woman, and the editorial board has ranged between 16% and 28% female, closely tracking the gender composition of the methodology subfield itself. By contrast, *Politics & Gender* (P&G), governed by the APSA Women and Politics section, represents the opposite institutional extreme. The journal has been led almost exclusively by women, with 100% female editors, 75–100% female associate editors,

and 86–89% female editorial board membership. Taken together, these three cases show how editorial authority reproduces subfield demographics and shapes expectations about whose scholarship is most likely to be published, circulated, and cited (Dion et al., 2018).

These structural contrasts have clear implications for citation behaviour. Where women constitute a clear critical mass, as in politics and gender, female-, male-, and mixed-gender author teams are expected to cite women's scholarship at similar rates. In contrast, political methodology, still heavily male-dominated, is expected to exhibit pronounced gender citation gaps, consistent with earlier findings from Political Analysis. APSR, as a generalist journal spanning the discipline, holds an intermediate position, reflecting both its broad remit and the fact that approximately 37.5% of APSA members self-identify as female (Dion et al., 2018).

Disciplinary comparisons reinforce this logic. Across the social sciences, methodological subfields tend to be male dominated, but the magnitude of gender imbalance changes by discipline. For example, in 2013, women constituted only 24% of economists, compared to 32% of political scientists and 52% of sociologists. These differences are reflected in the editorial composition of leading methodology journals. Between 2007 and 2017, women accounted for roughly 4–16% of editorial leadership roles in *Econometrica*, compared to 7–21% in *Sociological Methods & Research* (Dion et al., 2018).

By and large, these patterns can be framed through two mechanisms widely discussed in the literature on gendered citation practices. First, a “Matthew effect”, which explains that research associated with the dominant group becomes more central and more frequently cited, partly because there are fewer women to cite in male-heavy subfields. Second, a “Matilda effect” can persist even as representation improves: women's work may still be treated as less central or less authoritative, and therefore receive weaker recognition in citation practices. Citation behavior thus reflects not only individual author choices but also the gendered organization of disciplines, subfields, and editorial gatekeeping (Dion et al., 2018). Dion, Sumner, and Mitchell also investigate how often men and women cite female scholars in political science and method journals. They find significant gender differences in citation behaviour. As summarized by Sara Mitchell in an interview, “Male authors cited women's work at a rate of 14% lower than their female peers” (Rachael Pells, 2018).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that gendered patterns of recognition in conflict and security studies are structurally embedded in citation practices, editorial gatekeeping, and disciplinary hierarchies, shaping which forms of research become visible, reusable, and eventually treated as standard knowledge.

3. The Development of Gender-Focused Research on the Karabakh Conflict (2000–2024)

When applied to Karabakh scholarship, the hierarchy described in Section 2 is visible in where gender-relevant work tends to appear: it is more often published in interdisciplinary journals, edited volumes, or practitioner reports than in the core conflict-security outlets that anchor canonical reading lists.

Before 2020, gender-lensed Karabakh research appeared sporadically and largely outside mainstream security journals. Najafizadeh's study of Azerbaijani IDP and refugee women from the First Karabakh War, published in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, is a key example: it

foregrounds women's narratives and coping strategies, but its venue places it closer to gender/interdisciplinary audiences than to canonical conflict-security bibliographies (Najafizadeh, 2013).

There was a noticeable change around 2019, with practitioners, policy organisations, and even academics doing more gender-focused work. The increased international focus on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in the late 2010s (United Nations Security Council, 2020) and the resurgence of international attention to the Karabakh conflict before to the second war in 2020 both occurred during this time. When taken as a whole, these elements created momentum for including women's experiences into the creation of conflict knowledge. A landmark example is a major 2019 report by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation titled *Listen to Her: Gendered Effects of the Conflict over Karabakh and Women's Priorities for Peace*. Produced by an international women's peacebuilding NGO and based on extensive field research with women affected by the conflict, the report documents gender-specific security concerns, displacement experiences, livelihood disruptions, and peace priorities largely absent from dominant narratives. In its opening, it presents itself as "the first in-depth examination of the effects of the Karabakh conflict on women, their livelihoods, and agency". The report underscores that presenting women's everyday concerns can "reconceptualise the notion of peacebuilding" in the conflict, drawing on feminist peace and security approaches (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2019, p. 12).

This surge was also supported by the WPS policy climate. Since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) (UN Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2000), international frameworks have increasingly emphasized women's participation in peace processes and the gendered impacts of conflict. By the mid-2010s, global reviews of the WPS agenda highlighted persistent knowledge gaps regarding women's roles and needs in conflict settings (Coomaraswamy, 2015). In the late 2010s, donors and NGOs operationalized these priorities through funded projects on specific conflicts, including Karabakh, which contributed to the production of reports such as *Listen to Her*. However, much of this output circulated through policy and civil-society venues rather than core security journals, limiting its uptake into canonical conflict bibliographies.

Another notable example is the 2020 edited volume *Women's Everyday Lives in War and Peace in the South Caucasus*, edited by Ulrike Ziemer. This academic collection positions itself explicitly as a corrective to decades of geopolitically dominated analysis of the region. In the overview, the volume's primary aim is "to shift the pre-occupation with geopolitical analysis in the region and to share new empirical research on women and social change" (Ziemer, 2020). Its chapters examine themes such as widowhood in conflict, care economies among displaced families, women's grassroots peace activism, and social survival strategies in Karabakh's uncertain environment. The volume also frames women's navigation of wartime life (through informal economies, community support networks, or mourning and memory) as part of how conflict unfolds and how its impacts are managed. This approach aligns with contemporary feminist peace research, which argues that gender dynamics are woven into the fabric of conflict and peace processes rather than being external "soft" issues.

The 2020 volume and other similar collections therefore once again signal that gender is present in the Karabakh knowledge landscape and is analytically consequential.

4. Citation Patterns and the Dominance of Strategic Narratives: Karabakh Conflict Scholarship

Within literature on the Karabakh conflict, an unequal distribution of scholarly attention is reinforced through citation practices as well. A prominent example is *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (Thomas de Waal, 2003, later edited in 2013), which quickly became an unrivaled reference work on the Karabakh conflict and remains widely cited as an authoritative source (Broers, 2015), (Khalilzade, 2024). Published by a major press, the book has been extensively reviewed in venues such as *Foreign Affairs*, and it appears frequently in mainstream overviews by policy institutes. Major conflict analyses and histories in high-visibility outlets (e.g., Carnegie Endowment reports, Crisis Group briefings) routinely cite *Black Garden*, further reinforcing its canonical status. By contrast, gender-focused work is far less visible in the highly cited core of Karabakh bibliographies and citation networks.

Examples clarify how this asymmetry works in practice. The report “Listen to Her” is widely referenced in NGO as well as policy forums and has informed advocacy initiatives (Hilditch, 2021). Yet because it was released as a standalone report rather than a journal article, it has minimal presence in commercial citation databases. Similarly, academic contributions on peacebuilding and gender inclusivity in the Karabakh context often appear as book chapters in edited volumes, which are unevenly indexed at the chapter level. One example is a chapter by a young female Azerbaijani researcher examining women’s exclusion from the Karabakh peace process, published in a report called *Corridors – Proceedings Vol. III* (Relitz, 2021, p. 66). Such chapters typically do not get systematically indexed in Web of Science/Scopus.

More recent peer-reviewed research confirms that gendered dimensions of the conflict remain underrepresented in leading conflict and peace journals. For example, a 2025 study in *Nationalities Papers* analyzes women’s participation and exclusion in Armenia-Azerbaijan’s post-war peace process, concluding that substantive inclusion remains very limited due to persistent structural factors, such as societal barriers, and even women’s self-exclusion, rather than simple oversight (Vassileva, 2025). Yet even such a contribution has not (to date) been treated as a standard “entry-point” reference for conflict studies in the way strategic narratives are.

Another example is Sinéad Walsh’s chapter “Gender, Conflict, and Social Change in Armenia and Azerbaijan,” published in the *Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (Walsh, 2021). While it offers valuable analysis of how gender norms and the Karabakh conflict interact, it appears as a handbook chapter (Chapter 41) rather than a journal article.

Further evidence comes from regionally focused studies. A 2023 qualitative study in the *Mediterranean Journal of Gender and Women’s Studies* conducted interviews with rural Azerbaijani women in Barda to document their experiences of war and their ideas for peace. The study “Rural Women in Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping: Azerbaijani Rural Women’s Perspectives on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict” (Babayeva, 2023) provides grounded insights, but it was published in a national/regional journal not indexed by Web of Science or Scopus. Likewise, feminist perspectives that link lived experiences to broader structural inequalities often circulate as op-eds or blog pieces without formal citation tracking. For instance, Walsh’s 2014 article in *OpenDemocracy* critiqued the “masculinised structures” of the OSCE Minsk Group and the exclusivity of the negotiating format, arguing that the all-male, great-power approach was failing to

produce peace. Yet because such contributions appear in media outlets rather than scholarly journals, they “drop out” of academic accounting (Walsh, 2014). A similar dynamic can be observed in Claudia Ditel’s chapter *Women’s Transformative Power in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, which situates women’s grassroots peace initiatives and experiences of militarized patriarchy as analytically relevant to conflict dynamics. This chapter has limited citation uptake to date (Springer metrics: 5 citations) (Ditel 2022).

To examine whether gender-focused research on the Karabakh conflict is disproportionately produced by women scholars, the study conducted an author-level review of key gender-related publications identified in the literature (e.g., Najafizadeh 2013; Ziemer 2020; Walsh; Ditel 2022; Twum et al. 2019). Author gender was identified based on publicly available academic profiles and institutional biographies. While this approach does not capture the full universe of authorship and should be treated as indicative rather than exhaustive, the review suggests that a substantial share of gender-focused Karabakh research is authored or co-authored by women. This pattern is consistent with broader findings in International Relations that women scholars are more likely to publish on gender-related topics, while receiving comparatively lower citation uptake in mainstream security literature.

Rather than reflecting a lack of scholarship, this distribution points to uneven pathways of recognition and uptake. Strategic and geopolitical accounts continue to define the core interpretive framework of the conflict, while gender-sensitive research remains only marginally integrated into the venues through which academic legitimacy and influence are consolidated.

5. Visibility in Academic Databases: Evidence from the Karabakh Literature

Another major factor shaping the gendered landscape of conflict knowledge is the structure of academic indexing and language hierarchies. Global citation databases heavily privilege English-language publications and journals indexed on major commercial platforms. Research on the Karabakh conflict published in Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, or in local academic journals is far less likely to be indexed in these databases, and thus effectively “doesn’t count” in global citation metrics (Rafols et al., 2016). Even high-quality studies and important regional policy papers may remain invisible to scholars conducting literature reviews through these indices. This is a known systemic issue: English has become a near-universal requirement for indexing in selective databases, producing the “systematic exclusion of large segments” of non-English or local scholarship from global visibility frameworks (Nazarovets et al., 2026). In the Karabakh case, gender-relevant knowledge produced in local languages or regional contexts can be doubly marginalized: first by language, and second by venue. If one relied only on globally indexed sources, one might conclude that the conflict’s literature is almost entirely gender-blind and authored mostly by men, a conclusion that reflects indexing bias at least as much as it reflects the underlying reality of knowledge production.

Studies show that the Web of Science, for example, is strongly biased toward English-language journals. Scopus provides somewhat broader international coverage, but both databases underrepresent non-English-speaking and developing countries in their indexed corpora. English therefore overwhelmingly dominates both major citation databases. In Scopus, 92.64% of indexed documents are published in English; in Web of Science, the proportion is even higher at 95.37%. The gap is substantial: in Scopus, the next most represented language is

Chinese at only 2.76% of indexed publications; in Web of Science, Spanish ranks second at 1.26% of total content. These figures demonstrate how English-language scholarship structurally shapes what becomes visible in global indexing systems (Singh et al., 2021), (Vera-Baceta et al., 2019, p. 4).

Many contributions that center women’s experiences or social dimensions circulate in formats that are less index-friendly: NGO reports, policy briefs, local university journals, or chapters in conference proceedings. Therefore, even though such works circulate widely among practitioners and local experts, they also remain weakly “countable” in the bibliometric layer (Singh et al., 2021).

To identify whether gendered analysis is structurally marginal within the Karabakh conflict scholarship, I conducted a structured comparison using OpenAlex, as institutional access to Scopus was not available. Using identical conflict identifiers – “Nagorno-Karabakh,” “Karabakh,” and “Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict,” I first constructed a general conflict corpus without applying any topical filters, keeping all years and all publication types. This baseline search produced 3,946 publications. I then applied a topic restriction. Because additional related concepts generated zero results, I was required to select only one available classification, “Gender, Security, and Conflict,” which yielded 11 publications. This means that gender-centered conflict analysis represents approximately 0.28% of the total indexed Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict literature in OpenAlex ($11/3,946 \approx 0.28\%$).

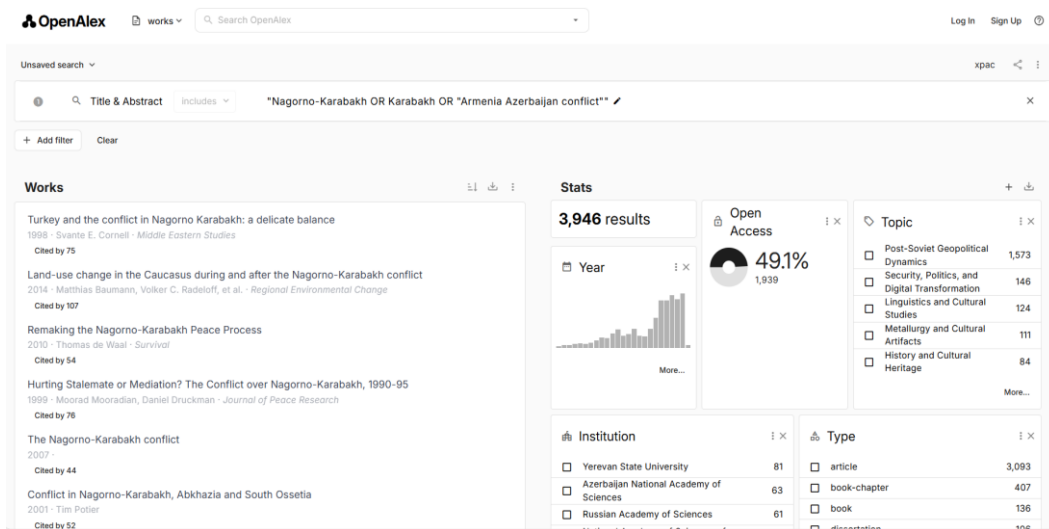


Figure 1. OpenAlex comparison of general Karabakh conflict publications

Data extraction was conducted on 13 February 2026, providing a fixed temporal snapshot of the OpenAlex database. As mentioned above, the precise search queries combined the conflict identifiers “Nagorno-Karabakh” OR “Karabakh” OR “Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict,” and searches were applied to titles and abstracts rather than author-supplied keywords to capture publications explicitly referencing the conflict in their core descriptive metadata. No restrictions were imposed on publication types, allowing articles, book chapters, books, and dissertations to be included so as to reflect the full diversity of publication formats through which gender-relevant research circulates. The OpenAlex interface was accessed with “extension package” (xpac) to improve coverage and filtering functionality, which may produce minor numerical variations across

repeated queries but does not alter the overall proportional imbalance identified. OpenAlex topic classifications operate through algorithmic clustering based on citation networks and semantic similarity across titles and abstracts rather than manual subject tagging; thus, assignment to the topic “Gender, Security, and Conflict” reflects probabilistic topical proximity inferred by the database.

The thematic structure of the general corpus further illustrates the imbalance. Dominant clusters include Post-Soviet Geopolitical Dynamics (1,573 publications), followed by concentrations on security, politics, digital transformation, history, and cultural heritage. Gender does not appear as an intersecting or secondary topic within these dominant clusters. Publication formats also reflect structural asymmetry. In the general conflict corpus, 78.4% of outputs are journal articles (3,093 publications), the format most strongly reinforced by citation systems, syllabus construction, and reputational accumulation. By contrast, in the gender-classified subset (n = 11), six outputs are journal articles, three are book chapters, one is a monograph, and one is a dissertation, indicating a more dispersed format distribution. Institutional patterns reinforce this marginalization. The general corpus is anchored in major regional research centers, including Baku State University, the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan State University, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and institutions that function as central nodes in the production and reproduction of conflict expertise. The gender corpus, by contrast, is concentrated in a small number of non-core institutions, with visible clustering in institutions such as the University of Winchester and isolated contributions from others, including Tallinn University, and with no representation from principal academic centers directly connected to the conflict. Indexing infrastructure further amplifies this disparity: while 2,857 publications in the general corpus are registered in Crossref, only eight of the eleven gender-classified outputs are Crossref-indexed and one in DataCite, limiting their algorithmic visibility and citation potential.

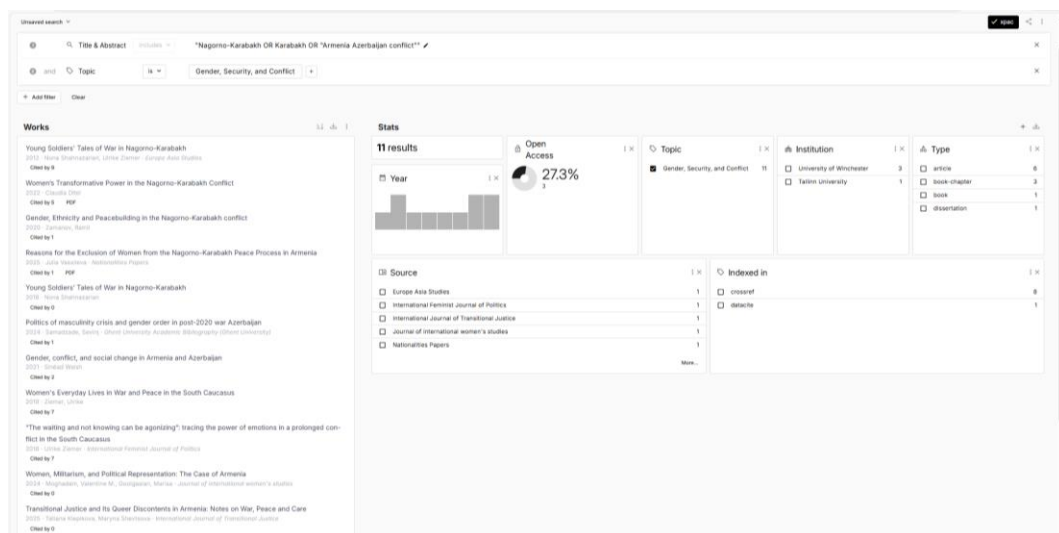


Figure 2. OpenAlex comparison of gender-classified Karabakh conflict publications

Taken together, the OpenAlex findings on the Karabakh conflict reinforce the broader argument of this section: what appears as thin gender literature in mainstream discovery systems is less a reflection of intellectual scarcity than of how bibliometric infrastructures filter and amplify particular kinds of conflict knowledge. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge methodological limitations: OpenAlex relies on automated indexing and machine-learning topic

classification, and therefore may not capture works that engage gender implicitly without using explicit terminology in titles or abstracts. The results presented here should thus be interpreted as an approximation of visibility patterns within a major open bibliometric database rather than an exhaustive census of all gender-relevant Karabakh scholarship. The selection of OpenAlex was motivated by its transparency, reproducibility, and open accessibility, which allow systematic comparison in the absence of subscription access to Scopus or Web of Science.

6. Consequences of Asymmetric Knowledge Visibility

The asymmetric visibility identified in academic databases is not only a descriptive pattern of publication circulation; it also has practical consequences for how the Karabakh conflict is taught, governed, and reconstructed. When certain forms of knowledge, primarily strategic, territorial, and military analyses, achieve higher citation density and institutional recognition, they are more likely to inform curricula, policy frameworks, and international mediation agendas. Conversely, perspectives that remain less visible in core databases, including gender-focused analyses of displacement, care economies, and everyday recovery, tend to exert weaker influence on the design of post-conflict governance and peacebuilding priorities. The following subsections trace these consequences across three key domains: teaching syllabi, policy design, and post-war reconstruction and mediation practices.

6.1. Effects on Teaching Syllabi

Evidence from Azerbaijani university syllabi suggests that Karabakh-related content can enter teaching primarily through a national history framework, which in turn helps define what counts as “standard” knowledge for students encountering the conflict through formal curricula. For example, a 2024–2025 “Azerbaijani History” syllabus approved by the Department of Caucasus Studies and Azerbaijani History within the Faculty of International Relations and Regional Studies at Azerbaijan University of Languages frames the course as contributing to historical memory includes dedicated modules on the conflict over Karabakh and surrounding districts, the 2020 war, and the post-war period, including reconstruction and return-related themes. At the same time, the visible bibliography foregrounds general national history textbooks and official/legal materials, while gender-focused conflict scholarship does not appear in the assigned readings, indicating that gendered aspect of the conflict again remain peripheral within the curricular knowledge structure (Azerbaijan University of Languages, 2024). A similar structural tendency can be observed in international teaching architectures: A course “Ethno-Political Conflicts in the Caucasus,” offered at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, situates Karabakh as one case study within a broader theoretical sequence on ethnicity, nationalism, escalation, and reconciliation, drawing on core readings such as Cornell’s *Small Nations and Great Empires* and Suleimanov’s work on ethno-political conflict alongside canonical ethnic-conflict literature. In this design, Karabakh is approached through mainstream ethno-political conflict frameworks rather than through gender or WPS perspectives, illustrating how curricular organization across different academic contexts can reproduce a dominant knowledge pathway in which strategic, territorial, and escalation-focused analyses are simultaneously positioned as foundational, while gender-sensitive perspectives enter, if at all, as supplementary lenses (Brisku, 2019).

6.2. How does it influence policy design and post-war reconstruction frameworks?

Policy design in the post-2020 Karabakh context can be documented as being organized primarily around territorial reintegration, infrastructure rebuilding, and human security tasks such as demining, which aligns with how “standard” conflict knowledge often foregrounds state capacity, stabilization, and physical recovery. At the strategic level, the Government of Azerbaijan’s “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development” frames national development priorities around themes such as a competitive economy, inclusive society, and environmental sustainability, while also explicitly linking medium-term development to post-conflict recovery imperatives in the liberated territories (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021). In parallel, the President of Azerbaijan’s official “Great Return” portal consolidates post-war measures under the concept of return, reconstruction, and reintegration, and links to the Presidential Order approving the “1st State Program on the Great Return to the Liberated Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, indicating that the core policy architecture is programmatic and logistics-oriented, which focused on settlement planning, service provision, reconstruction (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d), (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021). Complementing this national policy framework, the World Bank’s Azerbaijan Country Economic Memorandum (2022) identifies the reconstruction of liberated territories as a near-term development priority and discusses post-conflict recovery primarily in macro-fiscal, infrastructure, and investment-planning terms, illustrating how mainstream recovery analysis conceptualizes reconstruction chiefly through territorial development and public investment lenses (World Bank Group, 2022).

Post-war reconstruction frameworks are likewise evidenced as being built around phased physical rehabilitation, demining, restoration of basic services, and the creation of enabling conditions for return. In parallel, international development documentation underscores operational recovery constraints, particularly mine clearance: UNDP’s global mine-action financing compendium includes Azerbaijan among supported contexts, highlighting clearance and national mine-action capacity-building as essential preconditions for safe return and reconstruction timelines (United Nations Development Programme, 2021, p. 4).

At the same time, policy design in Azerbaijan has incorporated economic recovery and entrepreneurship dimensions that intersect with post-conflict reintegration, yet these frameworks largely operationalize gender as a targeted policy field rather than as a core analytical lens shaping the overall recovery strategy. OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) assessments note that the government mainstreamed MSME-focused (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise) policymaking through the establishment of the Small and Medium Business Development Agency (SMEDA) under the Ministry of Economy in 2017 and through initiatives under the Strategic Roadmap for the Production of Consumer Goods at the Level of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship. These measures included credit guarantees, entrepreneurial training, export promotion services, and specific support instruments for women’s entrepreneurship, demonstrating that gender equality considerations are present within economic policy design but primarily as sector-specific interventions rather than as an overarching framework guiding post-conflict reconstruction or territorial reintegration policy (World Bank Group, 2022, pp. 162-164). The same OECD analysis further notes comparatively low levels of female ownership and women’s representation in management positions and recommends strengthened coordination, monitoring, and support measures for women’s entrepreneurship, indicating that gender remains

an evolving policy area where capacity-building continues to be pursued rather than a fully embedded structuring principle across all policy domains.

This dual pattern is analytically significant: gender is institutionally recognized within policy instruments, yet its incorporation tends to occur through discrete programmes, such as women's entrepreneurship incentives, resource centers, and ministry-level gender focal points rather than through a comprehensive gender-analytical framework applied across all dimensions of post-conflict governance.

6.3. How does it affect international mediation narratives?

International mediation narratives around Karabakh since 2020 can be evidenced as being structured first by ceasefire/implementation logics (security arrangements, corridors/communications, return logistics), and then by normalization logics (border delimitation, connectivity, peace treaty language, and "rights and security" framing), which tends to reproduce the same hierarchy identified in the literature: the conflict is narrated and "manageable" primarily through state-to-state stabilization toolkits, while gender-sensitive perspectives are rarely positioned as the organizing lens of mediation. The 10 November 2020 Trilateral Statement (Azerbaijan–Armenia–Russia) codifies this baseline mediation architecture in explicitly operational terms, such as cessation of hostilities, deployment of a peacekeeping contingent, parameters for the Lachin corridor, return of IDPs/refugees, and restoration of regional economic and transport links, i.e., a framework centered on security governance and territorial-administrative implementation rather than on social recovery dynamics or gender-differentiated effects of displacement and return (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d).

In later European Union-facilitated formats, the narrative shifts toward state normalization and institutionalized peace parameters: in his remarks after the 1 June 2023 meeting (including Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, and Germany), European Council President Charles Michel foregrounds workstreams such as progress toward a peace treaty, border delimitation, unblocking transport connections, and discussion of the "rights and security" issue in the Karabakh context, again reflecting a mediation storyline anchored in sovereignty/territorial arrangements, connectivity, and security assurances as the primary grammar of peace-making (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Within this framing, the conflict is predominantly narrated as a problem of interstate relations, territorial governance, and geopolitical balance, which positions military escalation, ceasefire mechanisms, and border arrangements as the core objects of mediation. This does not imply that international mediators ignore social or gender issues, rather, it indicates that the primary narrative structure of mediation remains anchored in state-centric conflict resolution logics, where stabilization, normalization, and treaty-making constitute the main reference points for defining progress in the peace process.

7. Discussion

This section interprets the article's findings on gendered visibility by situating the OpenAlex results within broader dynamics of knowledge production: the Karabakh literature's most easily discoverable "default reading" remains structured around strategic and geopolitical analyses, while gender aspect of the conflict circulates through less visible citation channels. As shown in OpenAlex query using identical conflict identifiers ("Nagorno-Karabakh," "Karabakh," and "Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict"), the baseline search yields 3,946 indexed publications, while the "Gender, Security, and Conflict" classification returns 11, or about 0.28%. In practical terms, a scholar searching standard databases for "Karabakh conflict" is therefore statistically far more likely to encounter military, diplomatic, and geopolitical work than gender-relevant research, even when the latter exists and is directly conflict-specific.

The second result concerns format. In the general Karabakh dataset, journal articles dominate, which matters because journal articles are the format most reliably indexed, easiest to retrieve, and most likely to accumulate citations. By contrast, much of the gender-relevant Karabakh work that this article traces travels through edited volumes, policy reports, and regional or interdisciplinary journals routes that are less consistently indexed at the chapter level and less likely to be pulled into mainstream conflict bibliographies. This helps explain a recurring Karabakh pattern: gender-focused contributions (e.g., Najafzadeh on displaced Azerbaijani women; Kvinna till Kvinna's field-based "Listen to Her"; Ziemer's edited volume on women's everyday war/peace lives; Ditel's peer-reviewed chapter on women's agency and informal confidence-building) circulate, but they do not become routine entry points in the way Black Garden does. For gender studies and social transformation research, the implication is concrete: when the most visible Karabakh explanations are built primarily from strategic sources, the social mechanisms that shape long-term recovery care burdens, livelihood rebuilding, household adaptation after displacement, and community-level coping risk being treated as "context" rather than as part of the conflict's core dynamics. For inclusive development debates, this matters because policies built on a narrow evidence base are more likely to miss how war reorganizes daily life and social resilience over time.

The overall conclusion is therefore not that gender research on Karabakh is missing, but that it is less likely to be seen and reused under the current visibility rules of the field. A more balanced Karabakh knowledge architecture does not require replacing strategic analysis, it requires making gender-relevant conflict knowledge easier to find, cite, and teach so that explanations of the Karabakh conflict reflect not only negotiation and battlefield outcomes, but also the social transformations that have shaped the region since the 1990s and after 2020.

8. Theoretical implications for conflict studies and International Relations

The first theoretical implication is that "standard knowledge" functions as an infrastructural category, not only an epistemic one. In conflict studies, baseline explanations often emerge through repeated reuse: what is easiest to retrieve becomes easiest to cite; what is easiest to cite becomes easiest to teach; what is easiest to teach becomes easiest to treat as foundational. This creates a feedback loop in which strategic and state-centric frames, already well aligned with dominant publication venues and indexing systems, acquire the status of default conflict expertise. The article's core claim, then, is that canonical authority in conflict research is partly generated by discoverability conditions, not only by argumentative strength. This matters for IR because it shifts the unit of analysis from "bias in individual

scholarship” to field-level production of authority: knowledge hierarchies can persist even when gender-relevant research exists, if it is systematically less legible to the infrastructures that govern review articles, syllabi, and citation networks. Put differently, the paper reframes gender marginalization in conflict knowledge as an instance of epistemic stratification: a structural ordering that determines which kinds of evidence become part of what the field routinely counts as conflict explanation.

A second theoretical implication concerns what conflict studies often treat as “context.” When gendered displacement, care burdens, and household adaptation are positioned as supplementary, the field risks naturalizing a division between “core conflict dynamics” (escalation, bargaining, territorial control) and “social consequences” (everyday survival, recovery labour). Yet many of the processes that stabilize or destabilize post-war environments, such as return decisions, livelihood rebuilding, local legitimacy, community security are mediated through household-level constraints and gendered labour. The paper therefore suggests that epistemic hierarchies do not merely produce representational imbalance, they can produce analytic incompleteness by making some causal mechanisms less likely to be theorized as constitutive of conflict and peace.

9. Policy implications for inclusive reconstruction in the South Caucasus

The policy relevance of this argument is not that reconstruction frameworks “should” become gendered for normative reasons, but that inclusive reconstruction requires evidence completeness under conditions of limited attention and high operational pressure. Post-war recovery agendas in the region understandably prioritize demining, infrastructure, services, and administrative reintegration. The risk identified here is a sequencing problem: when the most visible and reusable knowledge emphasizes territorial and infrastructural recovery, social recovery evidence is more likely to enter policy as a cross-cutting appendix rather than as baseline diagnosis. In practice, this can affect what is measured and therefore what is managed. If needs assessments and monitoring indicators are not designed to capture gender-differentiated constraints on return (care responsibilities, access to livelihoods, documentation barriers, mobility and safety concerns, sectoral employment patterns), then “successful return” may be evaluated primarily through physical outputs (housing units, roads, utilities) even when social reintegration and livelihood sustainability remain uneven.

The implication is procedural: inclusive reconstruction is strengthened when institutions treat gender-relevant dynamics as planning variables, not only as vulnerability narratives. That means embedding gender-disaggregated baselines into return and livelihood programming, building consultation mechanisms that surface household-level constraints early, and making implementation learning visible through indicators that can travel across policy documents and donor reporting. In this sense, the article connects knowledge visibility to governance capacity: what is legible in the evidence base is more likely to become legible in policy design, and what remains peripheral in research infrastructure is more likely to appear in policy only as an afterthought or a targeted program rather than as part of the core theory of change. The final implication is methodological and comparative. The approach developed here, linking bibliometric visibility to downstream knowledge pathways (teaching and policy framing), is portable to other conflict settings where large bodies of gender-relevant evidence exist but may not become canonical within security-oriented literatures. Comparative research could test whether similar “visibility-to-standardization” mechanisms operate across: (a) Ukraine, where a vast policy and academic ecosystem has emerged and where the question is whether gender/WPS knowledge becomes more fully integrated into mainstream conflict canons or continues

to circulate partly in specialized policy and gender focused communities; (b) Georgia's protracted conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), where long-term displacement and everyday governance are central, enabling a test of whether protraction strengthens social lenses or further entrenches strategic frames; and (c) the Balkans, where extensive transitional justice and peacebuilding scholarship allows a different test: whether mature gender and civil-society research becomes standard when the institutional architecture (EU integration, peace agreements, donor fields) is dense, or whether indexing and format dynamics still sort it into parallel literatures. These comparisons would not only assess generalizability but also clarify boundary conditions: under what institutional and publication ecosystems does gender-relevant conflict knowledge become truly field-defining rather than merely present.

10. Conclusions

This article has argued that the apparent thinness of gender-focused Karabakh conflict scholarship in mainstream discovery environments is not best understood as an intellectual absence, but as an effect of how academic visibility is produced. The contribution is therefore not simply descriptive ("gender is under-cited") but diagnostic: it identifies the mechanisms, indexing coverage, publication formats, and citation cascades through which some conflict knowledge becomes standard and other knowledge becomes specialized, even when both are empirically relevant to understanding war and post-war change. The central idea is that epistemic hierarchies are not an abstract academic concern: they shape the empirical completeness of conflict explanation and the practical completeness of recovery design. By showing how visibility structures help decide what becomes "standard," the article identifies a concrete leverage point for both scholarship and practice: improving the discoverability, citability, and teachability of gender-relevant conflict research is a way to strengthen the analytical foundations on which post-war governance and peacebuilding priorities are built without displacing strategic analysis, but by reducing systematic blind spots in what the field treats as foundational knowledge.

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Intersectional Barriers to Women's Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh: A Policy and Evidence Review

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Abstract: Despite the implementation of gender-responsive financial frameworks in Bangladesh, a persistent "Empowerment Paradox" indicates that macroeconomic gains have not translated into equitable outcomes for marginalized women. This research employs an Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) to investigate how overlapping social identities specifically geography, physical ability, and ethno-linguistic background reconfigure the trajectory of Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE). Utilizing a systematic synthesis of national policy documents and independent data from the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Bangladesh Bank (2020–2025), the findings reveal a "Filtering Matrix." This matrix demonstrates that "one-size-fits-all" SME policies disproportionately benefit urban, socio-economically advantaged women while creating "institutional frictions" for others.

Crucially, the study identifies the digital divide in rural regions and the lack of universal design in training infrastructure as systemic gatekeepers to formal capital. Furthermore, the research utilizes a modified neoclassical growth framework to quantify how rigid masculine norms regarding unpaid care work induce significant "time-poverty," restricting the labor elasticity (L) of female-led enterprises. The analysis concludes that current "nominal" inclusion must be replaced by "Intersectional Accommodation." This paradigm shift requires the integration of Alternative Credit Scoring (ACS), multilingual digital interfaces, and decentralized "phygital" service delivery to ensure that the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals are met through truly inclusive growth.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Women's Economic Empowerment; SME Finance; Time-Poverty; Digital Divide; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) is a global endeavour that is frequently portrayed as a straight path from financial exclusion to agency. This story is especially evident in Bangladesh, where women have changed over the past 20 years from being "passive beneficiaries" of microcredit to "active agents" in a multi-sectoral economy (Kabeer, 2020). The continuation of what could be called the "Empowerment Paradox" in spite of this change points to a basic mismatch between the goals of policy and the realities at the grassroots level. The substantial FY2026 Gender Budget shows that the number of gender-responsive financial frameworks has increased, but the distribution of economic rewards is still remarkably unequal. The urgency of this research is underscored by recent data from the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD, 2024), which indicates that while female-led SME deposit accounts have surged, the conversion of these

deposits into formal credit remains stagnant for marginalized subgroups. Furthermore, the rapid "digitalization" of the financial sector has introduced new gatekeepers. As of early 2025, the digital divide remains a structural bottleneck; rural women are 38% less likely than men to own the smartphones required for the Bangladesh Bank's new "Startup Finance" portals (GSMA, 2024).

This study scrutinizes the "filtering effects" of contemporary financial ecosystems using an Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA). It makes the case that unless the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are approached from the perspective of "Intersectional Accommodation," the promise of "Leaving No One Behind" will continue to be a theoretical goal rather than a tangible policy result.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. Deconstruct the "Empowerment Paradox" by identifying the specific intersectional factors (geography, disability, and ethnicity) that impede resource flow to marginalized women.
2. Quantify institutional frictions within the digital and physical delivery of current SME policies, utilizing a modified neoclassical growth perspective.
3. Formulate a strategic roadmap for "Intersectional Accommodation" that transitions from nominal financial inclusion to substantive economic agency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of WEE in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, access to microcredit has traditionally been associated with economic emancipation. While microfinance offered a "safety net" for rural women, Kabeer (2020) points out that it frequently failed to support "transformative agency"—the capacity to grow small businesses into competitive SMEs. According to recent research, reducing "procedural friction" through a reconfiguration of the institutional environment is necessary for the shift to formal banking, which calls for more than simply credit (Khalily, 2021).

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Beyond the Single-Axis Lens

This study challenges conventional economic models using the Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989). According to conventional policy, "women" are a homogenous category. On the other hand, intersectionality asserts that overlapping systems of discrimination are produced by social factors including location, ethnicity, and disability. According to this hypothesis, a woman belonging to an ethnic minority group bears a "double burden" when it comes to financial inclusion: she is excluded from digital banking due to her language, and she is excluded from credit markets due to her gender.

2.3 Integrating the Neoclassical Growth Perspective

To provide a rigorous economic analysis, this review adopts a modified **Neoclassical Growth Model**. The standard production function is expressed as:

$$Y = f(A, K, L)$$

Where:

- Y = Total Economic Output
- A = Technology (Digital Finance/Innovation)
- K = Capital (SME Loans/Credit)
- L = Labor (Entrepreneurial Activity)

In the context of Bangladeshi women, "institutional frictions" act as a negative multiplier on A and K . For instance, if a woman cannot access digital tools (A) due to the rural digital divide, her ability to utilize capital (K) is diminished, regardless of how much credit the government allocates. Furthermore, "Time-Poverty" acts as a constraint on labor (L), as unpaid care work reduces the time available for productive enterprise (Duflo, 2012).

2.4 The Capability Approach

Complementing the growth model is Sen's (2023) Capability Approach, which argues that empowerment is not just about having resources, but about the *freedom* to achieve desired outcomes. In Bangladesh, even when women have "nominal access" to a bank account, they may lack the "substantive opportunity" to use it due to social norms or physical barriers (disability). This research fills the gap in the literature by examining how these capabilities are restricted by intersectional factors.

3. Methodology

The "filtering effects" of contemporary financial ecosystems are dissected in this research using an Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA). Unless the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are approached via a framework of "Intersectional Accommodation," it contends, the promise of "Leaving No One Behind" would remain a rhetorical ambition rather than a resulting policy.

3.1 Data Acquisition and Strategic Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was applied across three domains to ensure an intersectional dataset. The temporal scope was bounded between 2020 and 2025 to capture the socio-economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent accelerated digitalization of the Bangladeshi SME sector:

1. **Statutory and Regulatory Databases:** Analysis of primary policy documents from the Bangladesh Bank and the Ministry of Finance, focusing on gender-budgeting allocations and stimulus disbursement guidelines.
2. **Developmental and Independent Evaluations:** Synthesis of "bottom-up" data from the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and UNDP, providing critical evidence on unpaid care work and credit access that frequently diverges from official state figures.
3. **Infrastructural and Digital Metrics:** Empirical evidence for the "digital divide" and "collateral trap" was drawn from the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2024) and World Bank country updates.

3.2 Analytical Framework: Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA)

The core analytical engine of this research is the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA)

framework, as pioneered by Hankivsky (2012). This framework is utilized to deconstruct the "single-axis" lens of gender that dominates current Bangladeshi economic policy. The analysis followed a three-stage coding process:

- Descriptive Coding: Identifying the explicit and implicit targets of WEE policies.
- Intersectional Mapping: Subjecting each policy to a multi-axis matrix (*geography \ times ability \ times ethnicity*) to identify where "one-size-fits-all" logic fails marginalized subgroups.
- Friction Analysis: Determining how social identities create compounded barriers that act as negative multipliers within the neoclassical growth model.

3.3 Synthesis and Thematic Triangulation

To ensure internal validity, the research employed thematic triangulation. Findings from official bank reports were cross-referenced with independent survey data (e.g., CPD). This critical synthesis allows the paper to move beyond descriptive statistics toward a nuanced critique of the "Filtering Matrix" presented in the discussion.

4. Discussion

The review's conclusions imply that rather than a lack of policy engagement, the persistent discrepancy between policy commitments and women's actual economic circumstances in Bangladesh is a reflection of more serious structural issues. Women's involvement in banking has grown during the past ten years, as have gender-focused financial initiatives. All groups of women have not, however, benefited equally from these advancements. Rather, women who are already urban, educated, and connected to the internet continue to reap the benefits of SME funding and inclusion programs.

This unequal result can be explained by intersectionality. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, exclusion is often shaped by overlapping social identities rather than gender alone. In Bangladesh, women's access to economic opportunity is strongly influenced by where they live, whether they have disabilities, and whether they belong to minority ethnic or linguistic communities. These factors combine to create barriers that are not visible when policies treat women as a single, uniform category.

4.1 Digital Finance and Unequal Access

Bangladesh has been pushing digital finance especially online loan applications and digital banking services as a means of empowering women. However, not everyone has access to these resources. Rural women's access to digital-first financial initiatives is restricted because they are still far less likely than men to acquire smartphones (GSMA, 2024). In areas like the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where literacy rates and network coverage are below the national average, this disparity is much more pronounced. This digital divide implies that the technological variable (A) does not serve as a multiplier for marginalized women from the standpoint of the previously presented growth paradigm. Instead, it becomes a barrier that prevents labor (L) from effectively connecting with capital (K), stagnating the productive potential of rural enterprises. Min (2022) notes that digital finance can only be inclusive when designed around the realities of marginalized users. Otherwise, digitization simply shifts older inequalities into new spaces. Khalily (2021) similarly emphasizes that institutional procedures themselves often become barriers.

4.2. Disability, Physical Access, and Credit Barriers

Mainstream models for financial inclusion seldom address the additional layer of exclusion that women with disabilities experience. Dedicated banking desks, support centers, and training programs are usually found in cities and are not made with accessibility for people with disabilities in mind. Even when K is available, this limits L . Access to SME loans is further restricted by the "collateral trap," where the majority of women do not own formal property (World Bank, 2022).

4.3. Time Poverty and the Limits of Enterprise Growth

CPD (2024) shows that women perform 7.5 times more unpaid care work than men, creating a significant "time-tax" that restricts L . This burden reduces the time and energy women can invest in enterprise development, even when capital is available.

4.4 Filtering Matrix of Intersectional Barriers

The overlapping nature of structural barriers can be summarized in the following Filtering Matrix, showing how geography, disability, ethnicity, and education shape access to technology, capital, and labor:

Table 1. Filtering Matrix of Intersectional Barriers to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh

Intersection Axis	Variable Evaluated	Barrier / Exclusion Mechanism	Impact on Growth Model
Geography	Rural vs. Urban	Digital divide; limited physical infrastructure	A (technology) acts as a barrier; rural L cannot fully access K
Physical Ability	Disabled vs. Able-bodied	Inaccessible training and banking venues; lack of universal design	L constrained; marginal productivity limited despite available K
Ethno-Linguistic	Bengali vs. Indigenous (CHT)	Language barriers; social marginalization	Communication frictions reduce access to K and A ; lowers effective L
Socio-Educational	Formal vs. No education	Procedural complexity; literacy gaps	Understanding and access to K limited; technology adoption (A) hindered

When considered collectively, these results imply that women's financial inclusion in Bangladesh is still uneven since policies frequently overlook the variety of women's situations. Financial empowerment methods must acknowledge the unique obstacles faced by rural women, disabled women, and ethnic minority entrepreneurs in order to go beyond numerical gains. Strategies like disability-accessible infrastructure, localised agent banking, multilingual support, and alternative credit scoring would help guarantee that inclusion policies reach people who are most frequently excluded. Ultimately, Bangladesh’s progress toward SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) will depend not only on expanding women’s participation in financial systems, but also on redesigning those systems so that they respond to women’s different lived realities.

5. Conclusions

The Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) framework in Bangladesh exhibits a "Empowerment Paradox": despite the growth of gender-responsive programs and budget allocations, advantages remain concentrated among urban, technologically savvy, and socioeconomically privileged women. Rural, disabled, and ethnic minority women face a number of related obstacles, including geographic

isolation, poor infrastructure, language marginalisation, and restrictive societal standards. As a structural "Filtering Matrix," these limitations restrict their ability to effectively access labour (L), capital (K), and technology (A).

Despite holding 35% of deposit accounts, women only receive 16.49% of commercial loans, indicating a persistent financial divide. The shift to online-only Startup Finance platforms further excludes over 38% of rural women without cellphones or reliable internet connectivity (GSMA, 2024). In addition, women provide an invisible 21% of GDP in the form of unpaid care, which is 7.5 times greater than that of males. This leads to severe time poverty, which impedes the growth of businesses and profitable investments (World Bank, 2022).

Lack of institutional reforms addressing intersectional marginalisation, digital inequities, and unpaid care obligations could result in the FY2026 Gender Budget allocation (33% of total expenditure) underserving marginalised populations. Moving away from aggregate gender quotas and toward inclusive design is necessary to maximise women's productivity and achieve sustainable national economic growth (Y).

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Entrepreneurship among Women Victims of Rape in Eastern DR Congo: Alternative strategies for reintegration through access to employment, the case of South Kivu province

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Abstract: *The conflict that has ravaged eastern DRC for decades is more intense than ever. While the first challenge for women victims of violence is to survive, the issue of economic empowerment is central. Through this study, we aim to contribute to the promotion of gender equality and women's rights by supporting the entrepreneurial activities of women victims of rape (WVR) in South Kivu province. This allows us to understand and analyze the determinants of entrepreneurial success among WVR beneficiaries of reintegration and to assess the effectiveness of existing reintegration strategies based on opportunities for job creation for women survivors (including entrepreneurship). Methodologically, eighty women victims of rape supported by the Panzi Foundation participated in the survey. Three main findings emerged from this study: (i) three factors determine the entrepreneurial success of WVR beneficiaries of economic reintegration: the profile of the beneficiaries (age and vocational training), the reintegration project (the reintegration strategy), and the characteristics of reintegration (income, and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA)). (ii) The reintegration strategy is effective and depends on priority measures taken by the organization supporting women victims of rape, ranging from training to the creation and management of income-generating activities. Thus, in terms of the beneficiaries' subjective assessment of themselves, 56.25% of beneficiaries are moderately satisfied with the reintegration strategy. (iii) 93.8% of women victims of rape who are entrepreneurs enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. The entrepreneurship of women victims of rape plays a key role in reducing gender inequalities.*

Keywords: *Economic reintegration, entrepreneurship, women victims of rape, South Kivu*

1. Introduction

As elsewhere in the world, sexual violence is a problem that has affected much of human society throughout the centuries (Patrick, 2010). Nevertheless, it has become increasingly clear that the problem is much more prevalent in situations of conflict and political instability. Most wars have been characterized by an upsurge in sexual assaults on women and girls (UN, 2024). Of all existing

forms of violence, sexual violence is considered the most pernicious in Africa due to its impact on women's personal integrity and its consequences for their physical and psychological health. In Central Africa, there are two countries where these forms of violence against women are most prevalent: Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo (REFELA, 2018).

The decades-long violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo is more fierce than ever. South Kivu province reported around 7,000 occurrences of sexual violence in the first half of 2024, which is the second-highest rate in the nation (UNFPA, 2024). Nearly 28 million people were experiencing food insecurity at the start of 2025, and over 7 million individuals had been relocated (Panzi Foundation, 2025). The prevalence of sexual assault is still high; in 2023, the UN reported over 123,000 instances, or one rape every four minutes (UNFPA, 2025).

The majority of women who are sexually abused in the DRC are from rural areas. For instance, 80% of victims are from other parts of the province, including Uvira, Mwenga, and Kalehe, but an average of 20% reside in the city of Bukavu. About 30% of survivors are minors, whereas the majority are adult women (Panzi Foundation, 2025). Nevertheless, these women are a force in agriculture and the economy. They primarily rely on agricultural labour to support their families and communities (Muhigwa, 2021). However, when they become aware of sexual violence, they either decide to leave their home environment entirely (Patrick, 2010) or abandon their fields and businesses, giving up tasks like fetching water, gathering and cutting firewood, etc. It is from this perspective that we can use the concept of "reintegration," i.e., the fact that rape victims leave their home environment after losing their economic power and being referred by a reception center for social and economic support.

In fact, in the DRC, the socioeconomic reintegration of raped women is no longer a hot concern. In general, it seeks to guarantee the autonomy of female victims through access to sustained paid employment or entrepreneurial endeavours (PNSR, 2012). In the first instance, the goal of reintegration is to assist beneficiaries in becoming "successful entrepreneurs" (PNSR, 2012); in the second instance, the goal is to provide employment options for female survivors. The most popular method of economic reintegration is still entrepreneurship, or the policy of encouraging reintegrated people to start their own businesses. Several studies that have already been done and others that are now in progress have shown positive findings in this area (Kaningini, 2019).

It is clear that in the short term, this strategy can appear effective thanks to a series of measures taken by those responsible for reintegration, ranging from training in the creation and management of income-generating activities to the support provided to survivors throughout the implementation of the project. Furthermore, when combined with the issue of sustainable economic reintegration under the constraints of entrepreneurial success, entrepreneurship raises a whole range of relevant issues that require further study.

However, to our knowledge, very little research has focused on the issue of sustaining the entrepreneurial activities of beneficiaries in the long term. This is why, taking into account the key factors for entrepreneurial success among women in general and women who have been victims of rape in particular, with the profile of the individual entrepreneur occupying first place (Hadrich, 2013), women survivors, due to their lack of confidence, stigmatization, and physical and psychological exhaustion, present a profile that is not very reassuring when it comes to facing the

challenge of being a first-time entrepreneur. Added to this is the discrimination that women face compared to men in the entrepreneurial process (Badia, 2013).

It is in light of the above that this study seeks to contribute by addressing the following questions:

- ✓ What are the determinants of entrepreneurial success among women who have benefited from reintegration?
- ✓ How effective is the economic reintegration strategy through the entrepreneurship of women victims of rape (WVR)?

These questions will help us define our research by examining the factors that determine the entrepreneurial success of women victims of rape who have benefited from reintegration programs, in order to assess the effectiveness of existing reintegration strategies based on creating employment opportunities for women survivors.

The hypotheses emerging from this study are therefore as follows:

H1. Three main factors explain the level of entrepreneurial success: the entrepreneur's profile, the reintegration project, and the characteristics of reintegration.

H2. The reintegration strategy through entrepreneurship is effective, which can be explained by the measures taken by the reintegration project, ranging from training to support for women benefiting from reintegration. It should therefore be noted that the criterion used to assess the effectiveness of this reintegration strategy is based on the beneficiaries' subjective assessment of themselves.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this paper focuses on the following points: Methodology and survey results processed, analyzed, and interpreted in relation to the objectives pursued.

2. Methodology

2.1. Location and participants

This study was conducted in South Kivu province, particularly in the city of Bukavu and the three territories of South Kivu. South Kivu was chosen because it is the province with the second highest rate of sexual violence in the country (UNFPA, 2024). As a result, the province remains in a catastrophic situation. However, several NGOs have developed dual expertise: supporting women in escaping violence and working specifically on the professional integration of women who are victims of rape (Mwati, 2013); (Marie-Pierre, 2016): training in business skills, training in professional trades: cutting and sewing, embroidery, basketry, soap making, baking (donuts, sandwiches, pancakes), soy milk extraction, leather goods, welding and fitting, automotive mechanics, culinary arts, Support for income-generating activities through the provision of subsidies in kind or in cash Agriculture Creation and training of Mutual Solidarity (MUSO) and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA).

This is how we became interested in the Panzi Foundation, particularly the Dorcas House. The Panzi Foundation was created in 2008 by Dr. Denis Mukwege. Located in the commune of Panzi in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Panzi Foundation continues the work of Dr. Denis Mukwege and his hospital, the Panzi Hospital, to enable the psychological and physical reconstruction and social reintegration of victims of sexual violence. For 18 years, the Panzi

Foundation has sought to be the voice of the oppressed, the victims, the Congolese girls and mothers who suffer the unimaginable every day in this region of the world, so coveted for its mineral resources, but whose inhabitants are left behind. Dr. Mukwege has developed a model that provides holistic care for victims and survivors of sexual violence. This model is based on four interdependent pillars that enable victims to rebuild their lives in a sustainable way after their stay at the Panzi Foundation (Panzi Foundation, 2018) : (1) Medical treatment: This involves, on the one hand, urgently collecting data to document the injuries sustained and providing initial gynecological, medical, and nursing care. The next step is to provide all the care necessary for recovery. This may include monitoring a pregnancy or treating an STI resulting from the violence, but also proper surgical follow-up to reconstruct all the functions affected by rape or other violence. (2) Psychosocial support: In addition to medical care, emergency psychological support and regular follow-up must be offered to victims to help them overcome the trauma they have experienced and/or post-traumatic stress, depending on when they began receiving care. This support can also be extended to their loved ones (spouse and/or children) either to help them support the victim or to help them overcome their own trauma resulting from the violence they have suffered. (3) Legal assistance: In addition to medical and psychological care, victims of violence must be assisted in their legal proceedings. This involves supporting them in procedures designed to ensure that the violence they have suffered does not go unpunished. To this end, they must be informed of their rights and assisted throughout the entire process: from the filing of a complaint to the end of the legal proceedings. The aim is both to offer them support in difficult proceedings and to ensure that they receive the best legal advice in order to obtain effective redress (sentence, damages, protective measures, and enforcement of the sentence). (4) Socio-economic reintegration: In addition to medical and psychological care and legal assistance, economic and social support must be offered to victims of gender-based violence and sexual violence. This pillar is provided by Dorcas House. Dorcas House is a transit and vocational training center located in Bukavu, run by the Panzi Foundation, which takes in survivors of sexual violence treated at Panzi Hospital who are unable to return directly to their communities, as well as other vulnerable women living in Panzi and the surrounding area who need economic support. It offers personalized support designed to enable survivors to rebuild their livelihoods and regain their independence. Thanks to secure transitional accommodation, beneficiaries have access to training in literacy, numeracy, sexual and reproductive health, as well as vocational training in various fields such as sewing, carpentry, hairdressing, and information technology. Survivors are also supported in launching micro-enterprises and sustainable economic activities, including coffee production, agriculture, and livestock farming. During their stay, they can join village savings and credit associations, thereby promoting financial independence, community support, and the development of female leadership (Panzi Foundation, 2025). In this study, we focused solely on the last pillar of "socio-economic reintegration" in order to evaluate the various economic reintegration strategies used by the Panzi Foundation's Dorcas House for women beneficiaries (entrepreneurs) and assess their effectiveness.

2.2. Research model

We adopted a quantitative methodology to test our research hypotheses. Using logistic regression as our data analysis method, we collected data via a questionnaire completed by 80 women who had been victims of rape and were receiving support from the Dorcas House run by the Panzi Foundation. Based on our hypotheses, we present the model we will use to explain the phenomenon of entrepreneurial success among women who have been victims of rape. Logit

regression allows us to estimate the probability that a woman who has been raped will be successful or unsuccessful in business. The approach consists of explaining the dichotomous variable y , which refers to entrepreneurial success and takes the value 1 if there is success and 0 if there is failure, based on a set of p variables (x_1, x_j, \dots, x_p). Theoretically, this probability estimate is given by the logistic function (Bugandwa, 2018) :

$$\Pi(x) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp(\sum_{j=1}^p \beta_j x_j)}$$

By linearizing the function more easily by introducing the natural logarithm on the odds ratios, which gives the following model:

$$\ln \frac{P_i}{1 - P_i} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 X_{2I} + \beta_3 X_{3I} + \dots + \beta_k X_{kI} + U_i$$

Where: $\left[\frac{p_i}{1-p_i} \right]$ the relative probability of entrepreneurial success; x_i : Independent variables included in our model; $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_j$ = model parameters ; U_i = the specification error term (difference between the true model and the specified model), this error is unknown and will remain unknown.

¹ The relevance of the results is validated through three tests: individual nullity test, Wald test, and Hosmer-Lemeshow test (Grimler, 2000) ; (Dress, 2007) ; (Rakotomalala, 2018).

It should be noted that Logit classification is quite similar to Probit regression. The two techniques tend to give almost identical estimates. However, in this study, we used the Logit model for two main reasons: Beyond the fact that our dependent variable is dichotomous, Logit is often used in economics and finance because the distribution of errors follows the Logistic law (Bourbonnais, 2015).

The research model is presented in the diagram below (Figure 1):

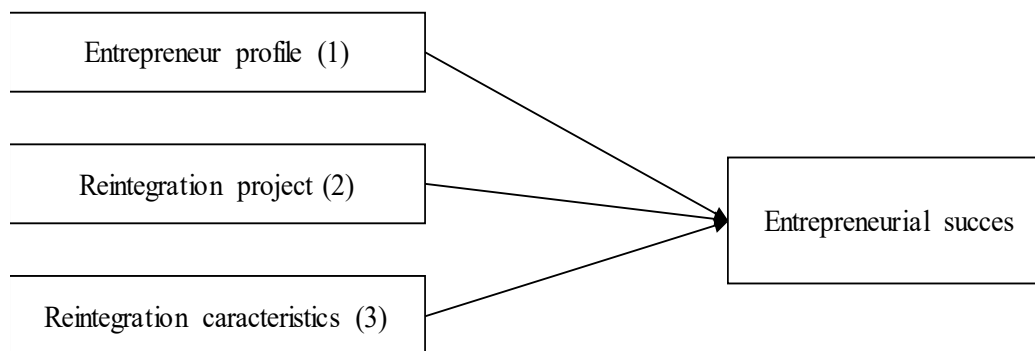


Figure.2. Research model of entrepreneurial success among women who are victims of rape

¹ Model validation also requires that certain criteria be met before determining optimality. Two criteria are chosen: AIC and BIC.

Source: Author

2.3. Operationalization of variables

Our explained variable is the "entrepreneurial success" of women beneficiaries of reintegration. This dichotomous (or binary) variable is defined as follows: Let Y be the entrepreneurial success variable, with Y=1 if there is success and Y=0 if there is failure. It is explained by a multitude of exogenous variables presented in Table 1 below:

Component	Type of Variables	Acronyms	Modalities	Expected Signs
	Independent variable			
	Entrepreneurial success		1 if successful, 0 if unsuccessful	
	Dependent variables			
Entrepreneur profile	Age	AGE	Quantitative variable measured in number of years that the survivor has lived.	+
	Vocational Training	VT	Multinomial variable: 1 = Literacy training; 2 = Numeracy; 3 = Sexual and reproductive health; 4 = Sewing; 5 = Carpentry; 6 = Hairdressing; 7 = Information technology.	+
Reintegration project	Reintegration strategy	RS	Quantitative variable measured on a Likert scale based on the subjective assessment of reintegration beneficiaries : 1= Completely dissatisfied; 2= Dissatisfied; 3= Moderately satisfied; 4= Satisfied; 5= Completely satisfied	+
	Grants	Gts	Quantitative variable measured in dollars of grants received for launching sustainable economic activities	-
	Income-Generating Activities (IGAs)	IGAs	Qualitative variable: 1 if the woman practices IGAs, and 0 if not.	-

Reintegration characteristics	Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA)	VSLA	1= if the woman belongs to a VSLA and 0 if not	+
	Income	Inc	Quantitative variable measured in dollars of average income from the activity	+
	Income satisfaction	IncSat	1= Completely dissatisfied; 2= Dissatisfied; 3= Moderately satisfied; 4= Satisfied; 5= Completely satisfied	-

Table 1. Characteristics of independent variables

Source: Author

More specifically, the model is as follows:

$$\ln \frac{P_i}{1 - P_i} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 AGE + \beta_3 VT + \beta_4 RS + \beta_5 Gts + \beta_6 IGAs + \beta_7 VSLA + \beta_8 Inc + \beta_9 IncSat + U_i$$

Please note that our data will be processed using STATA and SPSS software. SPSS will be used to produce descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, etc.), while STATA will be used for regression and to set up various tests to confirm the validity of our model.

3. Results

3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the surveys

Analysis of the variables (level of education and marital status) reveals that: the majority of women (66.25%) who participated in this study have a secondary education, (31.25%) have a primary education, and (2.50%) have no education. This higher number of women with secondary education can be explained by the fact that the majority of these women, upon arriving at the reintegration project, complete literacy training up to secondary level before moving on to vocational training (dressmaking, embroidery, soap making, IT, basket weaving, baking, and beauty care). Some reintegration actors believe that once they can read and write, that is enough for them. In terms of marital status, the majority of women (57.50%) are married, 33.75% are single, and 8.75% are widows. The predominance of married women can be explained by the fact that married women are increasingly exposed to rape as they seek to ensure the survival of their families in order to meet the daily needs of their households, particularly in terms of food, education, healthcare, clothing, etc. As a result, they have a greater need to take action to cover the household expenses for which they are responsible. Analysis of the variables (age, monthly income, number of children, and household size) then reveals that: the age of our respondents ranges from 16 to 52, with an average age of 30.05, or 30, because at this age, girls and women who are survivors of sexual violence and who benefit from economic reintegration are expected to answer questions related to rape and economic reintegration and can engage in various activities in the sector under study. The standard deviation of 8.312 shows a significant dispersion and, therefore, heterogeneity in our sample in terms of age. Furthermore, the income of the women in our sample ranges from

\$5 to \$100, with an average income of \$43.7. The average number of children is 4.23, or 4 children. The dispersion of the sample in terms of income is too high, with a standard deviation of 58,874.59, while for the number of children it is very low, with a standard deviation of only 2.391. Finally, about the household size variable, our results show a household size of between 1 and 14 people, with an average size of 6 people. When comparing our results with those of other studies conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we note that they tend to align with those presented in the Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (GPRSP), which states that "on average, a Congolese household has 6 members."

3.2. Presentation of results on the relationship between entrepreneurial success, entrepreneur profile, reintegration project, and reintegration characteristics

Regression analysis of entrepreneurial success on entrepreneur profile, reintegration project, and reintegration characteristics yielded the following results (Table 2):

Logistic regression	Number of obs	=	80
	LR chi2(8)	=	66.03
	Prob > chi2	=	0.0000
Log likelihood = -17.432671	Pseudo R2	=	0.6544

Entrepreneurialsuccess	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]
Age	1.982805	.6013362	2.26	0.024	1.094287 3.592763
ReintegrationStrategy	2.217982	.7034634	2.51	0.012	1.191209 4.129793
Grants	.9998872	.000046	-2.45	0.014	.9997971 .9999774
Income	1.000079	.0000266	2.99	0.003	1.000027 1.000131
Incomesatisfaction	.0048894	.0102953	-2.53	0.012	.0000789 .303103
Vocationaltraining	1.644461	.3971066	2.06	0.039	1.024411 2.639811
IGAs	.6589261	.1549801	-1.77	0.076	.4155595 1.044817
VSLA	1.205475	.1064383	2.12	0.034	1.013913 1.433229
_cons	5.71e-09	5.04e-08	-2.15	0.032	1.72e-16 .188963

Note: 0 failures and 1 success completely determined.

Table 3. Logistic regression of entrepreneurial success

Source: Data processing using Stata15.1

The model is generally sound, as the Wald statistic obtained is greater than the chi-square value read in the table at the 5% threshold. These results show that the entrepreneurial success of women who have been victims of rape is much more closely linked to age, reintegration strategy, income, vocational training, and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA). The reintegration strategy is statistically significant at the 5% threshold. It therefore appears that entrepreneurial success depends positively on this strategy, which consists of encouraging beneficiary women to become entrepreneurs through a series of measures taken by the reintegration project, ranging from training (in dressmaking, embroidery, soap making, IT, basket weaving, baking, and beauty care) to the creation and management of income-generating activities and membership in a Village Savings and Loan Association. It should therefore be noted that the criterion used to assess the effectiveness of this reintegration strategy is based on the beneficiaries' subjective assessment of

themselves, hence the significance and influence of the variables "vocational training, age, income, and Village Savings and Loan Associations." Thus, a good profile of female beneficiaries also has a positive effect on entrepreneurial success, which can be explained by the fact that those who undertake vocational training are fully committed to succeeding. We can therefore conclude that the reintegration strategy, a good profile, good reintegration characteristics, and age all contribute to success. In addition, we find that age is a real source of success and is significant at the 5% threshold. This can be explained by the fact that older women are more experienced and better able to cope with the challenges of covering household expenses for which they are responsible. Consequently, we can also say that the training undertaken by women is significant at the 5% threshold and increasingly leads to activities and access to financing from a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) for an entrepreneurial activity (IGAs) that ultimately generates income enabling them to meet the daily needs of their household, particularly in terms of food, education, healthcare, clothing, etc. (income satisfaction). Surprisingly, grants have no influence on entrepreneurship and reintegration into the job market, as these women receive almost no grants; only the Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) and Income-Generating Activities (IGAs) give them access to employment.

3.2. Presentation of the results of the control model

The optimal model based on the AIC, BIC, and Wald statistics criteria, the following regression was specified (Table 4):

Model	N	df	AIC	BIC	Wald	Hosmer-Lemeshow
8						
Variables	80	9	52.86534	74.30358	66.03	chi2(8) = 4.25 Prob > chi2 = 0.8334
11						
Variables	80	12	76.37992	104.9642	66.03	chi2(8) = 6.99 Prob > chi2 = 0.5372

Table 5. Results of the validation tests for the optimal model
Source: Data processing using Stata15.1

The AIC and BIC information criteria have increasing values, reflecting the idea that the increase in non-significant variables at the 5% threshold gradually reduces the quality of the adjusted model. With regard to overall significance tests, the Wald statistic remains constant with the omission of certain variables. Compared to the chi-square value read in the table at the 5% threshold, each Wald statistic is significantly higher than the corresponding chi-square. The interpretation of the Hosmer-Lemeshow test for the last model shows that the Chi-square statistic obtained using the Hosmer-Lemeshow test is lower than the Chi-square value read in the table and its probability is higher than the specified 5% threshold. This table shows that the optimal model is the first one with eight variables, as it meets all the pre-established criteria. However, its coefficients are not directly interpretable. Only their signs indicate whether the variables have a positive or negative influence on the probability of entrepreneurial success or failure. To determine the impact of each variable on the probability of entrepreneurial success for these women, the study uses odds ratios or marginal effects. Finally, as noted above, Table 3 shows that the eight variables considered are

statistically significant at the 5% level (only one variable is significant at the 10% level). In terms of overall significance, the model is satisfactory.

3.3. Presentation of the results of the female beneficiaries' assessment of the activities carried out and the reintegration strategy

First, below are the results of the level of appreciation of the female beneficiaries regarding the activities offered by Dorcas House (Figure 2)

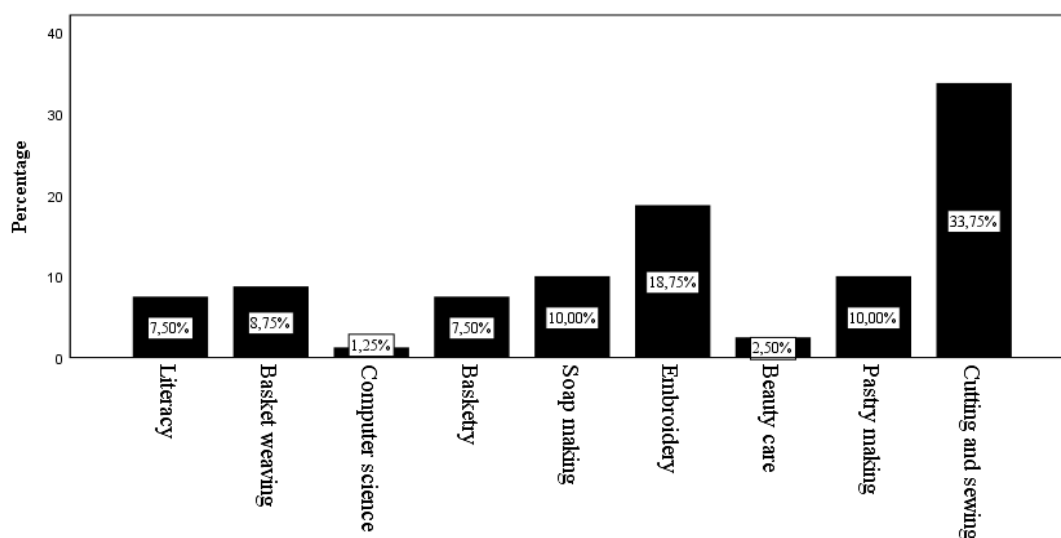


Figure 3. Level of appreciation of the female beneficiaries regarding the activities offered by Dorcas House

Source: Data processing using SPSS 25.0

It was observed that of the 80 respondents, approximately 33.75% expressed an appreciation for the activity of cutting and sewing alone, compared to only 18.75%; 10%; 8.75%; 7.5% of respondents who, on the other hand, expressed their appreciation for embroidery, pastry making, soap making, basket weaving, and literacy, respectively. As for computer science, it appears to be the least appreciated activity by beneficiaries, with only 1.25% appreciation, behind beauty care with 2.5% appreciation.

Next, below are the results of the level of satisfaction among women beneficiaries with the reintegration strategies implemented by Dorcas House (Figure 3)

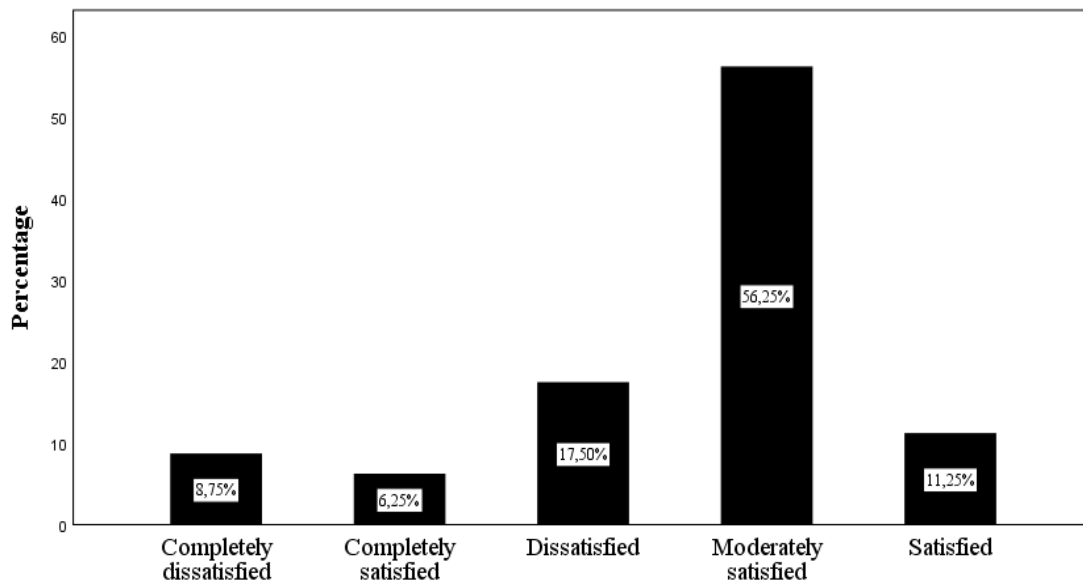


Figure. 4. Level of satisfaction among women beneficiaries with the reintegration strategies implemented by Dorcas House

Source: Data processing using SPSS 25.0

From this graph, we can see that 56.25% of beneficiaries are moderately satisfied with the reintegration strategy used by Dorcas House. Dorcas House organizes training courses (in various trades) accompanied by certificates, with the ultimate aim of ending the need for subsidies to create jobs for its beneficiaries. Only 11.25% and 6.25% of beneficiaries are satisfied and completely satisfied with this strategy. We also observe that 17.5% of beneficiaries are dissatisfied and believe that this strategy should be improved. Consequently, we noticed that almost all the women surveyed expressed the same need to increase the subsidies granted and made suggestions to Dorcas House. These women are very keen to start businesses, but they do not have sufficient turnover for their activities, and the Mutual Solidarity Organizations (MUSOs) and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) alone are not enough to finance them.

3.4. Empowerment of women victims of rape

Based on the above, it is important to examine the degree of empowerment of women victims of rape (Table 6).

Variable	Modality	Frequency	Percentage
Empowerment	No	5	6,3
	Yes	75	93,8
	Total	80	100

Table 7. Empowerment

Source: Data processing using Spss 25.0

This table shows that 93.8% of women victims of rape (WVR) who are entrepreneurs enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. These women develop their entrepreneurial spirit more effectively through reintegration projects. Most of them have been abandoned by their husbands after sexual violence and have developed survival mechanisms that promote access to and control over the resources and profits of their business, which are essential factors for entrepreneurial development.

4. Discussion

The study first highlights that three factors determine the entrepreneurial success of women victims of rape who benefit from economic reintegration: the profile of the beneficiaries (age and vocational training), the reintegration project (the reintegration strategy), and the characteristics of the reintegration (income, and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA)). Furthermore, the reintegration strategy is effective and depends on priority measures taken by the organization supporting women victims of rape, ranging from training to the creation and management of income-generating activities. Thus, as the reintegration strategy is statistically significant, its effectiveness has a positive impact on the relationship between the profile of beneficiaries and entrepreneurial success, as well as the relationship between the characteristics of reintegration and entrepreneurial success. These results seem to be consistent with those found by Glidja (2019), who found that there is a link between entrepreneurial success, the profile of the entrepreneur, and the characteristics of the environment, suggesting that there is a significant and positive relationship between these determinants and entrepreneurial success. These results coincide almost exactly with those found in our work, despite differences in the field of research. Our field of research focuses on the economic reintegration of women victims of rape in the province of South Kivu, while his work focused on female entrepreneurship in Senegal. Furthermore, our results show the effectiveness of the reintegration strategy on entrepreneurial success; on the other hand, his work showed the moderating effect of institutional support on female entrepreneurship in Senegal. In the same vein, these results are consistent with those found by Hadrich (2013), who also asserts that to ensure entrepreneurial success, women entrepreneurs must be motivated and have a good level of experience and skills (entrepreneurial profile). This result coincides with that found for our first hypothesis that a good profile of female beneficiaries also has a positive effect on entrepreneurial success. These results also corroborate those found by Elotmani (2020), showing that personal characteristics and the internal environment are determinants of entrepreneurial success for women. Motivations related to independence and spousal support prove to be the most important determinants leading to success for women in Senegal. The author limited himself to these determinants, but in the theoretical framework of this study, other determinants were tested (age, reintegration strategy, income, etc.).

Furthermore, this study highlights that 93.8% of women who are victims of rape and who are entrepreneurs enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. These results are verified by those found by Kaningini et al, 2019, Germain (2018), and Opadou et al (2016). Kaningini et al, 2019) found that 72% of women who are victims of sexual violence develop their entrepreneurial spirit as a survival mechanism. Germain (2018) found that women are highly motivated to become entrepreneurs in order to provide for their households, as they allocate their income to the well-being of their families. Finally, Opadou et al (2016) verified these results by finding that women victims of sexual violence have succeeded, through a process of resilience, in overcoming their disability or trauma to reintegrate into the socio-economic fabric.

5. Conclusion

Faced with a shrinking job market, the reintegration strategy (entrepreneurship) is a powerful alternative for women who have been victims of rape in South Kivu province. The overall objective of this study is to contribute to the promotion of gender equality and women's rights through the entrepreneurship of women victims of rape (WVR) in South Kivu province. Specifically, it aims to understand and analyze the determinants of entrepreneurial success among WVR beneficiaries of reintegration and to assess the effectiveness of existing reintegration strategies based on the potential for creating employment opportunities for women survivors. Our results show that three factors determine the entrepreneurial success of women victims of rape who benefit from economic reintegration: the profile of the beneficiaries (age and vocational training), the reintegration project (the reintegration strategy), and the characteristics of reintegration (income, and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA)). This confirms our first hypothesis. Furthermore, the reintegration strategy is effective and depends on priority measures for supporting women victims of rape, ranging from training to the creation and management of income-generating activities. As for the beneficiaries' subjective assessment of themselves, 56.25% of beneficiaries are moderately satisfied with the reintegration strategy. This confirms the second hypothesis. Finally, 93.8% of women victims of rape who are entrepreneurs enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. The entrepreneurship of women victims of rape plays a key role in reducing gender inequalities. We cannot claim to have been exhaustive. Like any human endeavor, this work does not claim to be perfect. It is not free from possible errors or omissions. We ask all our readers not to hold this against us and leave the door wide open for future researchers to make additions and suggestions. Our great joy is to have addressed this topic, which affects our daily lives.

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Feminist engagements with South Korea's conscription discourse: A framing analysis

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Abstract: *Male-only conscription has long been a flashpoint in South Korea's gender politics, frequently mobilized by anti-feminist actors to frame men as victims of reverse discrimination. Meanwhile, feminists are often portrayed as disinterested in conscription-related issues. This study challenges such portrayals by centering feminist voices in the conscription discourse through in-depth interviews with twelve self-identifying feminists. Findings reveal that while feminists broadly acknowledge the burdens of conscription on men, they simultaneously reject anti-feminist framings that weaponize the issue against women. Participants employed diverse action frames, ranging from oppositional arguments that criticized the weaponization of conscription by anti-feminists and the state's further instrumentalization of the issue, to rights-based equality frames that presented female conscription as a potential path toward gender equality. Although some respondents preferred gender-neutral conscription to a voluntary model, most emphasized that without systemic reform, implementation of female conscription risked further reinforcing patriarchal institutions. Experiences of backlash and dismissal further contributed to perceived feminist disengagement, illustrating how conscription debates often marginalize feminist perspectives. Ultimately, by reframing the conscription discourse beyond binary gender conflict framework, this study underscores the diversity of feminist positions and highlights the importance of inclusive dialogue reflecting the complexity of marginalized perspectives.*

Keywords: *Anti-feminism; Conscription; Feminism; Feminist Framing, Gender Polarization, South Korea*

1. Introduction

For many years, South Korea's (hereinafter, "Korea") electoral divides were associated with regional and generational differences, with young people showing the lowest support for conservative politicians (Cheong & Haggard, 2023; Lee, 2024; Shin et al., 2022). However, political developments over the last decade have revealed an ideological divide emerging along gender lines, manifested in significant demographic gaps in young people's political attitudes and electoral behaviors. For instance, although the Democratic Party (DP) candidate Lee Jae-Myung secured a landslide victory in the latest snap elections, young men's voting patterns demonstrated a continued shift to the right compared to other demographic groups. A total of 74% of men in their 20s (hereinafter, "20s men") cast their votes for a conservative candidate, with almost 40% voting for the prominent anti-feminist figure Lee Jun-Seok (Chung & Kim, 2025).

Scholars generally link polarization to the politicization of a group's grievances, specifically the formation of male victimhood culture in the context of gender polarization (McCoy et al., 2018). While gender polarization is not unique to Korea, the intensity of extreme othering between young men and women, combined with the world's lowest birth rate, a historical background of militarism, and strong anti-feminist sentiment, makes it a particularly compelling case for study. What sets Korea particularly apart from most developed nations is its male-only conscription policy. In fact, multiple scholars have found that conscription is a major factor contributing to anti-feminist ideology and support for right-wing politicians among young Korean men, with nearly 80% describing military service as reverse gender discrimination (Jenkins & Kim, 2024; Kim & C. Lee, 2022; S. C. Lee, 2024).

The origins of widespread anti-feminist backlash in Korea can be traced to feminist efforts in the 1990s to abolish the military extra-points system, which awarded discharged conscripts five per cent bonus in civil service exams (Bae, 2000). When the Constitutional Court declared the bonus points system unconstitutional in 1999, thus eliminating the main compensatory mechanism for conscription at the time, men responded by collectively targeting the feminist activists involved in advocating for the Court's decision through various online harassment campaigns (Kwon-Kim, 2000). Instead of questioning the conscription policy itself, the discourse shifted toward its male-only nature, sparking consequent calls to include women in the draft.

Discussions on female conscription persisted throughout the 2000s, coinciding with increasing capitalist competition over socioeconomic resources and policy reforms that significantly improved women's social standing (Kim, 2011). The gradual weakening of traditional gender norms, coupled with women's superior performance in recent education and employment trends, led many young men to question the relevance of conversations on gender inequality (Lee, 2024). Meanwhile, the "feminist reboot" of 2015, in response to rising nationwide misogyny, resulted in the popularization of feminism and the emergence of digital feminist communities like Megalia. This dynamic soon escalated into what scholars now term "gender wars" or "gender conflicts", and military service continued to emerge as a flashpoint in the public discourse, with the male-only conscription policy becoming central to men's resentment toward women (Kim & Lee, 2022).

Online petitions calling for female conscription in 2017 and 2021 garnered significant support, often citing labor shortages resulting from declining birth rates as the primary justification (Gyeonggi-do Women's Group Association, 2021). The male-only nature of conscription policy continued to be challenged also before the Constitutional Court, with male petitioners arguing that the system violated their right to equality (Lee, 2025). While the Court has consistently upheld the system's constitutionality on the basis of physical differences between men and women, its recent ruling acknowledged the possibility of future reforms considering demographic changes (CaseNote, 2023). Conscription once again emerged as central to the latest presidential campaign strategies aimed at appealing to young men, with both candidates from opposing major parties making pledges to increase women's participation in the military and improve compensatory mechanisms for male conscripts by either recognizing their military experience in public institutions and salary grade calculations, or reinstating the military bonus points system (Jo, 2025; Park, 2025). Following his electoral victory, President Lee instructed the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family to study reverse discrimination 20s men face, citing military service as a main grievance factor and suggesting the Ministry create a dedicated department on the issue (Baek, 2025).

Because male victimhood narratives dominate the public discourse, calls for female conscription are often framed solely as anti-feminist arguments. At the same time, women and feminists are usually portrayed as selfish and disengaged from military-related issues. However, existing surveys indicate that support for female conscription is not exclusive to young men or anti-feminists. According to a

2024 national survey, only 34% of the overall population opposed female conscription, with men and women showing similar levels of support (Kim, 2024). Notably, according to the same survey, supporters of the left-leaning Democratic Labor Party demonstrated the second-highest support for female conscription, just behind the conservative People Power Party (PPP). Another survey by the Korean Women's Development Institute (2019, as cited in GWGA, 2021) found that more than half of young women supported female conscription.

By addressing the gap in feminist research on conscription discourse, the current study challenges the perception that feminists are voluntarily disengaged from military-related issues. Building on this, it highlights the diversity and complexity of marginalized perspectives by examining how different feminist movement actors frame and rationalize their positions on conscription, as well as the public discourse surrounding it. In doing so, the study ultimately centers feminist perspectives as important, yet often underrepresented, voices in public debates where male victimhood narratives tend to dominate.

Following the introduction chapter, this paper proceeds with a literature review that examines previous research on conscription discourse, with particular attention to feminist framing of female conscription. This chapter also outlines the main concepts and analytical frameworks employed in the study, including contentious politics, social movements, militarized modernity, and specific feminist framing approaches relevant to the research topic. The subsequent chapters present the methodology, the findings, and the conclusion, which summarizes the study's contributions to the literature and highlights possible directions for future research. The findings chapter is organized around three key framing tasks, diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational, followed by a final sub-chapter that explores the diversity of participants' personal voices through the FRDA framework.

2. Framing conscription through contentious politics: feminist and anti-feminist narratives

According to Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) concept of "contentious politics", social movement actors often mobilize in response to existing grievances, with their collective actions involving "claims bearing on other actors' interests" (p: 7). When Korean feminists from Ewha Women's University, in collaboration with men with disabilities, filed constitutional appeals to abolish the bonus points system, their claims challenged the interests of conscripted men who viewed such points as few of the last remaining symbolic and material advantages for conscripts over exempt individuals (Bae, 2000). Describing the contention around the bonus points as the first instance of gender conflict in Korean society, Byeon et al. (2005) argue that although the Court's final ruling reduced an immediate clash, it failed to fully resolve underlying grievances, as the discourse shifted from compensation to the conscription system itself. Following the verdict, over 60% of men opposed the Court's decision, framing conscription as reverse discrimination and asserting that women should also serve if they wanted equality (Choo, 2020; Kwon, 2000).

Although early critiques of the bonus points came not only from women but also from men, specifically such as those with disabilities as well as in self-employment or farming who derived little benefit from it, such issues were deliberately sidelined in public discourse to frame the debate as a gender conflict (Choi, 2018; Kim, 2021). This framing, portraying women as privileged citizens depriving powerless male conscripts of opportunities, redirected men's frustration over mandatory military service toward women rather than the state and the military institution. Consistent with contentious politics scholarship, which emphasizes the emergence of countermovements mobilizing to halt or reverse social change, Korea's anti-feminist countermovement arose directly in response to the success of the feminist campaign to abolish the bonus points system (Derichs & Dana, 2014; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

This research adopts the framing approach in social movement literature, which conceptualizes movement actors as active agents who continuously construct and negotiate meaning. Drawing on Goffman's concept of interpretive schemata, framing scholars define collective action frames as shared interpretations developed through interaction that legitimize movement goals and strategies (Benford & Snow, 2000; Derichs & Dana, 2014). Within this framework, Benford and Snow (2000) identify three main framing tasks: diagnostic framing, which identifies the problem; prognostic framing, which proposes solutions; and motivational framing, which justifies calls to action.

Substantial research has examined the anti-feminist framing of the conscription discourse, with much of the literature focusing on how conscription has historically functioned as a key pillar of patriarchy and gendered citizenship in Korea. Introducing the term "militarized modernity", Moon (2005) extensively analyzes how mandatory military service has operated as a central rite of passage to full citizenship, with women excluded from conscription confined to the domestic sphere and treated as secondary citizens. More recent studies have argued for the weakening of the militarized modernity framework, noting that as Korean women's status improved and compensatory rewards for male conscripts were eliminated, military service came to be perceived less as a fulfillment of manhood and more as a time-consuming obligation disrupting men's education and careers (Choo, 2020; Kang, 2023). In this context, the anti-feminist countermovement's diagnostic framing included men's self-identification as victims of reverse discrimination and the assignment of blame to women and feminists. Additionally, their demands for female conscription and the reinstatement of compensatory mechanisms like the bonus points system, often justified through demographic and national security concerns, constitute prognostic and motivational frames (Bae, 2000; Kang, 2023).

On the other hand, beyond examining anti-feminist perspectives, there is relatively little research on feminist perspectives in the current conscription discourse. Nevertheless, existing studies on feminist movement actors' collective action frames provide a useful foundation for understanding the evolving discursive contest between the feminist movement and the anti-feminist countermovement in Korea.

Miller (1998) identifies two distinct feminist camps in the American female conscription debates: pacifists, who oppose female conscription, and others who promote female conscription through rights-based arguments. The first camp primarily employs oppositional frames, which are largely diagnostic and do not extend beyond problem identification (Hewitt, 2011). These counterframes often emerge in response to opposition and are viewed as discursive opportunities to refute or neutralize opponents' claims (McCammon et al., 2007). Within the framework of this study, oppositional frames address whether and how Korean feminists counter calls for female conscription.

While there are multiple ways to oppose female conscription, the most frequently mentioned frame in the Korean context is the "maternal" framing, which highlights the physiological differences between the sexes and the social roles constructed around those differences, emphasizing women's roles as caregivers and mothers who give birth to future soldiers (Goss & Heaney, 2010). However, this framing has faced sharp criticism by feminist scholars for reinforcing patriarchal notions. Choo (2020), for example, criticizes contemporary digital feminists for their continued reliance on bio-essentialist framing tactics and their apparent disinterest in reforming the conscription system. However, the maternal framing's current relevance is questionable, given Korea's record-low birth rates (Yeung et al., 2024). Beyond maternal framing, Kim (2021) has briefly explored other forms of feminist opposition to female conscription, including concerns about sexual violence and sexism in the military, as well as

pacifist critiques of the military itself as a violent patriarchal institution.

In contrast to oppositional frames that focus on countering anti-feminists, a growing camp of feminists uses rights-based equality frames to argue for women's sameness to men, including eligibility for the draft and participation in combat (Goss & Heaney, 2010; Miller, 1998). Challenging claims that Korean feminists disregard conscription as a "men's issue", Kim (2021) writes that women have historically expressed a willingness to serve in the military. This second camp includes feminist authors such as Ju (2017) and Lee-Kim (2003), who describe female conscription as a means to challenge traditional gender roles that depict women as the weaker sex in need of protection, seeing the military as one of the last remaining institutions upholding the patriarchal order.

Overall, the limited literature on feminist perspectives, mostly based on non-academic sources, reveals contrasting views on whether feminists have largely dismissed conscription as a male problem or have engaged critically with the issue. While little scholarly attention has been given to oppositional frames beyond the childbirth-based maternal argument, prognostic equality frames have also been largely neglected. Meanwhile, recent developments in public debate, particularly backlash from feminists in response to the government's attempts to reinstate compensatory measures for conscripted men, as well as the controversy over the "childbirth bonus points" suggested by a DP lawmaker, suggest that maternal framing might no longer hold significant relevance (Go, 2025). In fact, when reporting increasing positive attitudes among young women toward female conscription, Shin (2025) interpreted these views as evidence of women's willingness to serve in the military as a step toward achieving gender equality.

3. Methodology

The primary methodology for this research was qualitative, feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) of semi-structured interviews with 12 self-identified feminists. While the interviews provided an opportunity to explore in-depth how feminist individuals understood and interpreted the conscription discourse, FRDA, drawn from Thompson et al.'s (2017) analytical framework, helped trace how participants positioned their voices within different discursive framings to make sense of their lived experiences.

Data collection took place as a part of a larger study conducted to fulfill a graduate thesis requirement during the author's final semester of master's studies, in accordance with the university's institutional review board rules. The study was officially approved by the Institutional Review Board of Korea University on January 1st, 2025 (approval no. KUIRB-2025-0043-01). As the main goal was to speak with individuals who had prior engagement with the conscription discourse, participants were recruited through non-probability sampling, which involved directly reaching out to individuals who publicly expressed opinions on the topic in academic research, opinion articles, or news pieces, as well as through the author's personal network of feminist activists. The first recruitment stage was followed by a snowball sampling phase, during which earlier participants introduced the study to others who expressed interest. All respondents provided written informed consent prior to participation in the interviews.

Final list of interviewees included researchers affiliated with academic institutions, feminist activists formally involved in non-governmental organizations, university students, freelancers, and individuals without formal employment who were active in feminist, peace, labour, and youth movements. All 12

participants explicitly self-identified as feminists and engaged with the movement in various ways through academic scholarship, feminist organizations, protests, public education efforts, or more discrete forms of online and offline discourse. Although most were based in Seoul, the group spanned multiple generations as well as range of gender identities, as detailed in Table I. To protect confidentiality, all responses were anonymized with pseudonyms, and unisex names were deliberately chosen to avoid misgendering.

Respondent	Gender	Occupation	Location	Age group
Subin	Male	Youth community organizer	Seoul	20s
Naru	Non-binary	University student activist	Gyeonggi	20s
Seol	Genderqueer	Queer-feminist activist	Seoul	30s
Hansol	Male	Male feminist activist, educator	Seoul	30s
Minji	Female	Peace activist	Gyeonggi	30s
Haneul	Non-binary	Labour activist	Seoul	30s
Ms. Kang	Female	Politician	Seoul	30s
Prof. Min	Female	Professor	Gangwon	40s
Prof. Park	Female	Professor	Seoul	40s
Prof. Lee	Female	Professor	Seoul	40s
Prof. Jeon	Female	Professor	Seoul	50s
Ms. Moon	Female	Women's rights group staff (former)	Daegu	50s

Table I. Interview Participant Information

Almost all interviews, except one, were conducted entirely in Korean, and all were recorded and transcribed with participants' informed consent. After the responses were anonymized, thematic analysis was applied to categorize the interviews into key themes aligned with relevant framing concepts. The FRDA framework was then used to identify personal narratives, revealing contrasting or layered voices that highlighted the complexity of participants' responses.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1. Diagnosing the problem: situating conscription discourse within Korea's legacy of militarized masculinity and feminist counter framing

When asked to identify the main problems related to Korea's conscription system, nearly half of the respondents situated the military within the country's broader historical trajectory, viewing conscription as a largely unquestioned and normalized aspect of masculinized citizenship. This historical framing, in line with Moon's (2005) analysis of militarized modernity, highlighted decades of anti-communist propaganda that instilled a persistent, internalized fear of invasion from external enemies, including North Korea. While Korea's divided state and the collective perception of vulnerability to outsiders were regarded as the main factors used to justify the continued existence of conscription, most participants identified the dominance of male victimhood and reverse discrimination narratives as significant problems in the public discourse.

Importantly, none of the interviewees dismissed the difficulties faced by conscripted men when

criticizing male victimhood narratives. Several respondents described the male-only conscription policy as a form of structural violence, criticizing the state for disregarding men's individual rights by requiring nearly all to serve indiscriminately. While acknowledging male-only conscription as unfair and sympathizing with conscripted men, participants echoed the widespread view of military service as a significant disruption in young people's lives.

At the same time, feminist participants criticized the way men's frustration with conscription often manifested as misogyny, distinguishing their stance from anti-feminists by redirecting blame away from women. In this sense, participants' diagnostic framing functioned as oppositional counterarguments to anti-feminist narratives. Essentially rejecting the anti-feminist framing of male-only conscription as reverse gender discrimination, nearly all respondents identified the weaponization of the conscription issue by anti-feminists as a major problem. They described conscription not as a topic raised out of genuine concern for equality, but rather as a convenient hot-button issue used to frame men as victims of reverse discrimination. Accordingly, the persistence of male-only conscription created ideal conditions for men to embrace anti-feminist views, as their shared trauma bonding in the military often became a source of resentment toward women. Because nearly all Korean men had direct experience with the military, conscription functioned as a political tool and a potential emotional rallying point for the anti-feminist countermovement. Advocacy for female conscription was thus dismissed as merely a symbolic, emotionally charged argument that anti-feminists deployed to justify discrimination against women.

Participants placed responsibility for the exploitation of the conscription issue not only on anti-feminist movement actors, but also on the state and political figures who repeatedly instrumentalized the debate to gain electoral support. While interpretations differed on the exact direction of causality between conscription debates and the broader gender conflict discourse, respondents generally regarded the two as interconnected. One feminist scholar who had studied the history of the conscription discourse argued that although the original issue was about the relationship between male citizens and the government, the failure to confront the state directly during the bonus points controversy redirected men's collective frustration toward women and reframed the discourse from a gender conflict narrative. Furthermore, participants criticized the state for knowingly contributing to the gender conflict framing and argued that portraying conscription debates as fights between men and women helped maintain the status quo by diverting attention away from institutional responsibility and toward individual blame. The government's repeated reliance on the vague concept of "social consensus" was criticized as a deliberate evasion tactic used to delay action on politically sensitive issues, including female conscription. According to most participants, the government had little genuine interest in tackling the structural problems of the conscription system. The politician most frequently mentioned during the interviews was Lee Jun-Seok, whom participants viewed as a pivotal figure in reframing conscription within a gender conflict narrative to appeal to young male voters. The political benefits of the gender conflict framing for both deflecting responsibility for reform and mobilizing young male voters were seen as central reasons why public debates remained narrowly constrained by binary arguments focused almost exclusively on female conscription.

In opposition to anti-feminist framing of conscription as reverse discrimination against men, feminist participants argued that the system ultimately discriminated against women by continuing to position them as the weaker sex. This perspective was particularly evident in the respondents' rejection of maternal framing. In fact, all of them strongly opposed the childbirth argument, challenging previous

claims that equating childbirth with conscription remains a mainstream feminist stance in Korea. Instead, participants viewed maternal framing as a conservative position rooted in misogynistic logic and more commonly associated with older generations.

Furthermore, although some acknowledged the gradual erosion of traditional gender roles, participants continued to stress the enduring legacy of militarized masculinity, pointing to male-only conscription as a key factor contributing to Korea's persistent gender gap. Interviewees questioned the claim that military service no longer offered men any advantages, pointing instead to material gains such as bonus payments, pension contributions, and wage substitutes that continue to enhance men's employment prospects after discharge. One feminist scholar noted a shift in public discourse around compensation, observing that many people, including feminists who once firmly opposed compensatory measures, now support such policies. Attributing this shift to the growing narrative of male victimization, the scholar argued that, as a result, the government has become bolder in expanding benefits for conscripted men in recent years. For example, the Military Service Credit, which increases conscripted men's eligibility for old-age benefits and pension amounts, was recently expanded to double the additionally credited subscription period toward the National Pension system, soon to grant male conscripts a full extra year (NPS On Air, 2025). In addition to material compensation, participants emphasized the formative nature of conscription, viewing it as an essential period in the development of citizenship. For example, one male feminist referred to his own experiences as a conscripted soldier, describing military service as instrumental in helping him develop essential survival skills, including disaster-response skills. Overall, conscription was viewed as a structured experience that helped young men learn civic responsibility, acquire organizational and networking skills, and participate in forms of solidarity rarely found elsewhere in modern capitalist society. Respondents argued that while most men benefit from this structured environment, women are excluded from similar opportunities to build basic organizational skills and to learn how to navigate hierarchical institutions.

4.2. Feminist prognoses on conscription: from equality and oppositional frames to pacifist critiques and alternative reimaginings beyond the military

When moving on to proposed solutions, feminist participants acknowledged the growing popularity of equality framing among women, which presented female conscription as a potential tool to dismantle entrenched gender structures. Despite notable advances in Korean women's social standing, the military remains one of the few state institutions exclusively dominated by men. Since conscription has long been perceived as a pathway to full citizenship, the social exclusion experienced by women has become a major grievance. Some participants argued that extending conscription to women could broaden critical discussions on military practices and national security issues, topics from which women have historically been left out. Similar to earlier feminist advocates of female conscription like Lee-Kim (2003), some participants within this study also viewed women's inclusion in the military in significant numbers as a way to accelerate reform, as it would be easier for women to build collective resistance against discriminatory treatment than if they remained a small minority.

At the same time, participants often interpreted women's support for female conscription not as a genuine belief that it would lead to gender equality, but as a strategic response to widespread anti-feminist arguments. In this context, women's advocacy for female conscription was understood less within the equality framing and more as an oppositional counterargument designed to neutralize one

of the most commonly weaponized anti-feminist grievances. Most respondents suggested that young women were increasingly less likely to reject female conscription calls because they had grown tired of hearing men repeatedly raise the issue during discussions on unrelated topics. However, this interpretation, which understands support for female conscription among young women less as the product of thoughtful civic deliberation and more as a defensive concession to silence anti-feminist backlash, raises important questions about the nature of such support. Additionally, framing support for female conscription as oppositional complicates the scholarly definition of oppositional frames as purely diagnostic. While Hewitt (2007) argues that diagnostic frames stop at problem identification, interviewees' interpretations suggest that oppositional frames can also contain prognostic elements when responding to opponents' claims. In this case, Korean women's advocacy for female conscription, which is prognostic in nature, functions as a strategy to neutralize men's conscription-related grievances and counter anti-feminist claims about reverse discrimination, thereby still aligning with the logic of oppositional framing.

Importantly, although participants acknowledged some potential benefits of female conscription, they typically framed their comments in response to hypothetical "what if" scenarios rather than voicing strong personal advocacy for the policy. Even among those who supported the idea of female conscription, there was unanimous agreement that it should not be implemented before comprehensive military reform. When weighing the pros and cons, responses citing disadvantages outnumbered potential advantages. Challenging the claim that female conscription could help dismantle patriarchal structures, several respondents argued that including women in the military was more likely to legitimize its hierarchical, male-dominated foundations. From this perspective, simply adding women to a deeply gendered and discriminatory system would not resolve the underlying issues but instead force women to fight for gender equality within an institution that was never designed to accommodate them, ultimately adding to their burdens rather than alleviating them. The most frequently cited concerns in this regard related to sexual violence and the deeply ingrained stigma faced by female soldiers.

Many participants worried that the problem of sexual violence would only intensify if women were conscripted in large numbers without systemic measures to protect them from predatory behavior. Furthermore, nearly all of them believed that female conscription would fail to decrease gender conflicts in Korean society. Referring to entrenched biases within the military that make it extremely difficult for women to access leadership roles, participants cautioned that even if women joined men in conscription in hopes of achieving equality, their efforts would likely go unrewarded or ignored. Some even argued that male resentment could further intensify, as men might begin to view high-performing female soldiers as benefiting from special treatment or facing lower standards. Conversely, if women failed to perform at the same standards as their male peers, their shortcomings could be used to reinforce stereotypes that women are inherently unsuited for military service, thereby justifying their continued exclusion from male-dominated fields. Importantly, feminist concerns about women's underperformance in the military did not reflect a maternal framing that assumed women were inherently weaker than men. Instead, participants highlighted the structural and logistical obstacles that undermined women's equal participation in the military, including the bio-essential standards of physical examinations, the inadequacy of living quarters that failed to ensure privacy and safety for conscripts, and military equipment and practices designed exclusively around normative male bodies. Notably, these critiques often came from queer gender non-confirming participants, who reframed the issue through the lens of body politics and argued that the practical challenges faced by women and

other non-male bodies did not reflect inherent physical limitations, but rather revealed how the military institution knowingly produced such constraints.

Some respondents, particularly those involved in peace activism, offered a pacifist framing, raising concerns about the risk of intensified militarism and the deeper entrenchment of military values in civic life. For instance, one feminist scholar claimed that military service was a key reason why young men tended to be more conservative than young women. Extending conscription to women, she suggested, would likely result in women adopting similarly conservative views through the internalization of the military's rigid discipline and authoritarian values.

Overall, participants' prognostic framing often involved a critical reimagining of the conscription system as a whole, grounded in calls for expanded public discussions. Building on their previous diagnostic framing, which problematized the current framing of public debates focusing on anti-feminist male victimhood narratives, participants advocated for reframing the discourse to include structural and philosophical questions about militarism. Stressing the importance of addressing Korea's unresolved historical issues, interviewees called for expanding conversations through evidence-based research, inclusive academic dialogue, and unbiased media coverage. Some older respondents identified the military's lack of transparency and openness as a major barrier to meaningful public engagement, urging the government to incorporate the perspectives of civic groups, including human rights and peace activists, to counterbalance dominant militaristic narratives.

Participants engaged in peace activism maintained a pacifist framing, questioning the very necessity of conscription and encouraging more active resistance to the military. While most others also agreed that the complete abolition of conscription represented the ideal long-term goal, prevailing sociopolitical constraints related to national security issues led them to consider alternative approaches. Notably, only two participants supported an immediate transition to a voluntary service model. In contrast, more than half preferred to maintain mandatory service, criticizing voluntary models for their potential to intensify class inequalities. Among those who favored a gender-neutral universal conscription, many envisioned a model that extended beyond military service. Such respondents proposed broadening the concept of conscription to include other forms of civic and community service, while simultaneously redefining the notion of national security to allow individuals to contribute in ways aligned with their respective capabilities and circumstances.

4.3. Reclaiming the narrative: feminist motivations for continued engagement

A central motive behind participants' push for more active feminist engagement in conscription debates was to reclaim the discourse from being reduced to gender conflict. Even when respondents did not expect female conscription to be implemented in the near future, they worried about the issue's further instrumentalization by right-wing politicians. Recognizing the demographic pressures of low birth rates and shrinking military manpower, participants expressed concern that, without a deliberate peace-oriented approach, military reform discussions would remain superficial and regress into binary arguments about drafting women, potentially producing policy changes rooted in anti-feminist and misogynistic logic.

Overall, reflections on gender polarization within this study validated the growing perception that communication with the "other" is felt increasingly distant in the current climate of gender conflict. Younger participants, in particular, worried that the Korean society was already too divided to engage in

genuine dialogue, pointing to their everyday interactions with same-aged peers. At the same time, they resisted the notion that young men were inherently unreachable, warning that disengagement risked hardening boundaries and reinforcing an “us versus them” divide that could further polarize young men and women. Many called for spaces where young men could reflect on both the burdens and unique experiences tied to military service, stressing the need to create opportunities for them to share personal narratives as individuals navigating a system that also disadvantaged men in distinct ways. One male community organizer, who expressed concern about a growing tendency within activist circles to disengage from young men altogether, described his own struggle between acknowledging the difficulty of engagement and recognizing the risks of abandoning it. By insisting on the need for more discussion about constructive engagement strategies, participants highlighted a key dilemma for feminist activism not only in Korea but globally: whether to prioritize self-protection from hostile interactions or to take the risk of dialogue in hopes of shifting attitudes.

4.4. Contextualizing diverse feminist voices: how lived experiences shape engagement

The research findings mirrored Benford and Snow’s (2000) notion of contestation within social movements, which highlights the susceptibility of collective action frames to internal disagreements. Feminist participants in this study employed different justifications to frame their perspectives on conscription and, at times, voiced disagreements or criticisms of fellow feminists. For instance, one feminist scholar recalled emerging divisions within the movement following the abolition of the bonus points, between those who supported female conscription and those who advocated for the complete abolition of the military. She argued that such internal tensions contributed to the lack of sustained conversation on conscription, as feminists sought to avoid deepening rifts within the movement.

Overall, however, participants rejected the notion that feminists were inherently disinterested in conscription-related issues. Beyond the common perception of conscription as a “men’s issue” and therefore outside the jurisdiction of feminist activists, most of whom are women in Korea, respondents emphasized that the real barrier was backlash associated with engagement. In this context, I utilized the FRDA framework to understand how feminist engagements with conscription were shaped through the relationship between individuals and broader social structures. Drawing on personal experiences, participants recalled a wide range of reactions when discussing military-related issues, both from strangers and acquaintances, including family members and activist colleagues. Several cited experiences of anti-feminist backlash, with strangers online responding to their public statement with hostility, as well as negative reactions from known acquaintances, such as male friends. Even participants who initially received supportive feedback from friends or family expressed disappointment that their efforts failed to spark broader conversations. The reported lack of further engagement contributed to a sense of frustration among many feminists, making them more reluctant to revisit conscription as a subject of inquiry. As a result, they often redirected their focus toward issues more likely to gain rapid visibility and produce tangible outcomes, such as gender-based violence. Moreover, the perception of conscription debates as primarily anti-feminist arguments led many feminists to avoid the topic altogether, as they feared that engagement could inadvertently align them with anti-feminist rhetoric. Those reporting backlash emphasized that conscription was widely perceived as a “men’s issue” not only by feminists but also by the broader public. In this context, feminist perspectives, already stigmatized in Korea, were often ignored, particularly when addressing socially sensitive topics like military service. For instance, participants recounted being dismissed with comments such as, “You haven’t even served, so you don’t know what you’re talking about”. Even the

male respondent who had completed his military service reported being invalidated in online discussions, with strangers assuming he was female because of his feminist identity.

The FRDA framework's focus on relationality also illuminated how feminists positioned their voices within the conscription discourse and how their lived experiences shaped divergent perspectives. By tracing participants' personal voices through their direct engagement with the conscription discourse, the interviews revealed a range of contextual factors that shaped how different individuals approached the issue. For example, when discussing their encounters with anti-feminist backlash, participants who worked as professors suggested that their professional authority influenced how their opinions were received by others, often shielding them from more hostile reactions. Gender also emerged as a key factor in the complexity of feminist narratives, particularly for gender nonconforming individuals. Queer participants critically reflected on how the military continued to operate within rigid gender binaries, excluding those who did not conform to traditional male and female categories. They highlighted the inadequacies of such binaries, underscoring how the system further marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals. Moreover, participants who were born with a male gender marker argued that their legal gender status granted them a certain degree of legitimacy when speaking publicly about conscription. These participants not only believed their voices carried more weight in discourse but also felt a responsibility to speak publicly about conscription, since many women felt discouraged from doing so.

Beyond demographic characteristics, direct encounters with the military institution and close proximity to conscription realities also shaped participants' engagement in public discourse. For example, older female participants frequently cited their sons' conscription experiences as turning points in their understanding of the system, recounting how their awareness of the military's shortcomings deepened after hearing about their sons' firsthand experiences. Similarly, professional work with military structures and with young men further informed participants' perspectives. One male participant, who provided gender-sensitive training to conscripts, described his ongoing engagements with young men. He argued that these exchanges allowed him to better understand young men's frustrations, as well as to confront misinformation and facilitate more nuanced discussions. Overall, participants who reported maintaining close relationships with young men, whether through familial ties or professional work, were the most likely to advocate for continued engagement with this demographic.

Altogether, participants' reflections when talking about why it was challenging to engage with the conscription discourse revealed how deeply embedded the logistics of militarized modernity remains in Korean society. While some interviewees acknowledged that the hegemonic model of militarized masculinity had weakened in recent years, their responses also demonstrated how its residual forms have become internalized, thus rendering the military institution mostly resistant to critique. In this context, feminists especially face various limitations when attempting to address conscription-related issues. While participants' responses partly supported the argument that conscription is seen as a 'men's issue', they also showed that this view is not limited to young digital feminists, nor does it wholly explain the limited feminist engagement with the topic. Even when feminists recognize conscription as a serious issue requiring attention, they often encounter criticism suggesting that military service is not their place to speak on, especially if they have not served in the military themselves. Participants' experiences of backlash, from both progressive, feminist spaces, as well as the broader public and anti-feminists, help explain why feminist engagement with conscription has not persisted over time. Many have chosen to continue the conversation in more informal or discreet ways, indicating that even

those who are publicly active in the feminist movement regard military-related issues as particularly sensitive discussion topics. The interviews further illustrated that feminist engagement with conscription is not shaped by gender identity alone, but by a constellation of contextual factors, including professional status, personal encounters with the military, activist histories and proximity to conscripted individuals. These layered and context-specific narratives challenge binary framings that dominate public discussions and show how feminist thought evolves relationally, informed by both structural positioning and interpersonal realities.

5. Conclusions

By adopting a framing approach from social movement literature, this study examined how feminist actors position themselves within public debates on Korea's male-only conscription policy. Drawing on Benford and Snow's core framing tasks and interviews with 12 feminist-identifying individuals engaged in academic, activist, and everyday contexts, the findings challenge dominant portrayals of feminists as indifferent to military issues. Participants acknowledged the burdens conscription places on young men but situated the system within Korea's militarized modernity, where military service functions as a masculine rite of passage. They rejected anti-feminist claims that male-only conscription constitutes reverse discrimination, instead tracing it to a misogynistic logic that casts women as dependents in need of male protection. Conscription was framed as both a structural barrier to gender equality and a political tool mobilized to fuel male resentment and marginalize feminist voices. Contrary to assumptions that feminists rely on maternalist arguments equating childbirth with military service, participants uniformly rejected such framing. Although survey data indicate rising support for female conscription among young women, respondents interpreted this partly as a strategic counter to anti-feminist rhetoric. While many favored long-term gender-neutral universal service or demilitarization, they opposed the immediate inclusion of women without institutional reform, warning it could exacerbate existing inequalities. Finally, the study highlights internal diversity within the Korean feminist movement. Perspectives varied by gender identity, professional background, and personal ties to military service, underscoring how backlash, polarization, and intersecting identities shape feminist engagement in the conscription debate.

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Beyond Market Failure: Business Support Organizations, Institutional Intermediation, and Gendered Futures of Entrepreneurship

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Abstract: *This study develops a meso-institutional analysis of Business Support Organizations (BSOs) within Azerbaijan's post-2015 economic restructuring. While entrepreneurship policy is traditionally framed as market-failure correction, such perspectives often overlook the structural constraints inherent in resource-dependent transition economies. Drawing on second-best equilibrium theory, institutional economics, and collective action theory, this paper conceptualizes business associations not as first-best corrective mechanisms, but as institutional intermediaries stabilizing structurally constrained environments. The 2014–2015 oil price collapse, where hydrocarbons accounted for 95% of export revenues, triggered a 3.06% GDP contraction in 2016, marking a critical structural inflection point. In response, the Azerbaijani government's 2016 Strategic Roadmaps repositioned SME development as a national priority, embedding business associations within formal public-private dialogue (PPD) and governance structures. This transformed their role from consultative entities into operational intermediaries. Utilizing qualitative institutional mapping and macroeconomic evidence (2016–2024), the findings indicate that associations exerted measurable influence in technical coordination domains, such as export facilitation, EU PGI certification in agriculture, and regulatory simplification. Conversely, redistributive domains like fiscal policy remained centralized. The study observes that SME growth and increased financial access for women-led enterprises correspond temporally with this institutionalized participation..*

Keywords: *Business Support Organizations; Institutional Intermediaries; Gender and Economic Inclusion; Public-Private Dialogue; SME Development; Transition Economies*

1. Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that entrepreneurship is a key driver of structural change and economic diversification (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021). Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs) are positioned as catalysts for innovation, job creation, and the growth of the non-resource sector in transition economies (Ayyagari et al., 2007). The empirical results of SME-centered policy, however, differ greatly, especially in resource-dependent contexts where structural restrictions, institutional concentration, and macroeconomic instability limit firm-level dynamism and inclusive development outcomes.

These constraints are multidimensional: limited access to finance (Beck & Demirgüç-Kunt, 2006), fragmented market coordination, weak institutional trust networks, uneven participation in formal economic governance structures, and coordination failures between state and market actors. In such environments, entrepreneurship-led growth does not automatically translate into broad-based diversification or equitable economic futures. The question becomes not merely how to support individual enterprises but how to design institutional architectures that reduce coordination failures, mitigate information asymmetries, and stabilize interactions across economic actors.

Business Support Organizations (BSOs) and business associations represent one such institutional mechanism. Traditionally encompassing SME development agencies, incubators, export promotion agencies, and advisory bodies, BSOs aim to mitigate coordination failures and reduce transaction costs by strengthening firm capabilities and facilitating market integration (Piza, 2016). Yet their role is frequently misunderstood. They are often evaluated solely in terms of service provision training sessions delivered, advisory hours provided or export missions organized without considering their systemic governance function. Recent scholarship suggests that BSO effectiveness depends not only on the volume of services delivered but on institutional design, governance quality, and integration within broader policy ecosystems (Cravo & Piza, 2019).

In post-transition economies, these dynamics become more complex. Weak associational traditions, centralized governance legacies, and limited horizontal trust among firms constrain the spontaneous emergence of collective action mechanisms (Estrin & Prevezer, 2011). Under such conditions, business associations and sectoral unions may function as critical meso-level intermediaries linking firms to policy processes, coordinating market upgrading strategies, and stabilizing second-best equilibrium conditions (Lipsey & Lancaster, 1956).

Azerbaijan offers a compelling case for examining the deeper institutional role of associations. Between 2005 and 2014, the country experienced rapid growth fueled primarily by hydrocarbon exports (Humbatova et al., 2023). Oil and gas revenues financed large-scale infrastructure, urban modernization, and fiscal expansion. However, this model also generated structural concentration. Non-oil exports remained limited in diversification and sophistication, while SME integration into global value chains was modest.

The global oil price collapse of 2014–2015 represented a structural rupture (Sachs & Warner, 2001). The decline in global energy prices reduced fiscal revenues, pressured the currency, and exposed vulnerabilities in the banking system. GDP contracted by 3.06 percent in 2016, marking Azerbaijan's first recession in two decades. The crisis revealed that diversification required not only capital reallocation but institutional redesign.

The Strategic Roadmaps adopted in December 2016 articulated a new development trajectory (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016). Diversification, SME development, and export promotion were elevated to strategic priority. Crucially, these Roadmaps positioned business associations not as peripheral civil society actors or lobbying entities but as formal participants in public-private dialogue (PPD) structures, regulatory review processes, and sectoral coordination initiatives.

2. Historical and Institutional Context (2000–2014)

During the oil boom period, Azerbaijan's GDP growth rates were among the highest in the post-Soviet region (Humbatova et al., 2023; Khalil & Ibrahimov, 2023). Energy exports accounted for approximately 95 percent of total exports and more than 60 percent of fiscal revenues. The State Oil Fund of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ, 2023) accumulated substantial reserves, contributing to macroeconomic stability and financing large-scale public investment in infrastructure, urban modernization, and social programs.

Structural diversification, however, significantly trailed aggregate growth metrics. Due to limited technological advancement and poor integration into global value chains, manufacturing has not yet reached its full potential (Williamson, 2000). Dispersed landholdings, poor cold chain and storage infrastructure, uneven quality standards, and restricted access to export markets were all ongoing obstacles to agricultural output. SMEs operated in a regulatory environment that was administratively difficult and inconsistently implemented across industries and regions, albeit gradually improving via successive reforms.

Institutionally, business associations existed but were not deeply embedded in systematic policymaking processes. The National Confederation of Entrepreneurs (ASK), established in 2001, served as an umbrella organization representing business interests across sectors. Yet engagement with government structures was predominantly consultative and episodic rather than institutionalized within formal governance mechanisms (Doner & Schneider, 2000). Public-private dialogue (PPD) structures were ad hoc, lacking regularized feedback loops linking firm-level experience to policy adjustment and regulatory refinement.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Business Support Organizations in Development Policy

Business Support Organizations (BSOs) have become central instruments in entrepreneurship and SME development strategies worldwide (Hajiyeva et al., 2024). The scholarly literature on BSOs spans multiple intellectual traditions yet remains analytically fragmented in its conceptualization of their systemic role.

Traditional development policy frameworks situate BSOs within a market-failure paradigm. In this view, SMEs face structural disadvantages arising from information asymmetries, capital market imperfections, scale inefficiencies, and coordination failures that prevent efficient resource allocation (Beck & Demirgüç-Kunt, 2006). Business support institutions are therefore designed to correct these distortions through training programs, advisory services, export promotion, technology transfer, and facilitation of credit access. Through such interventions, BSOs aim to enhance firm competitiveness and integration into domestic and international markets.

However, empirical assessments of BSO effectiveness produce notably mixed results. While some evaluations report improvements in firm survival rates, export participation, and managerial capability development (Cravo & Piza, 2019), others find limited long-term productivity impact or demonstrate that benefits accrue disproportionately to already advantaged enterprises (Dvouletý et al., 2021). These variations are frequently attributed to differences in institutional governance quality, targeting strategies, ecosystem integration and the broader policy environment rather than simply service scale or program design.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes ecosystem perspectives that reconceptualize BSOs as embedded components within complex adaptive systems (Stam & van de Ven, 2021). Entrepreneurship ecosystems consist of interconnected actors—firms, financial institutions, regulatory agencies, universities, and intermediary organizations—whose interactions shape entrepreneurial outcomes through network effects, knowledge spillovers, and institutional complementarities. Within such systems, associations do not merely deliver discrete services; they mediate relationships, aggregate dispersed information, coordinate collective upgrading processes, and stabilize expectations across market participants.

3.2. The General Theory of Second Best and Institutional Constraints

The General Theory of Second Best (Lipsey & Lancaster, 1956) provides a critical analytical foundation for understanding associational development in structurally constrained economies. The theory posits that in economic systems characterized by multiple simultaneous distortions, removing a single distortion does not necessarily improve overall welfare. When first-best conditions are unattainable due to binding constraints, partial reforms may generate suboptimal or even counterintuitive effects depending on the interaction of remaining distortions.

In Azerbaijan's post-2015 institutional reforms, macroeconomic policy authority and fiscal resource allocation remained concentrated within central government structures (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016). Business associations were embedded primarily in regulatory review processes, export facilitation mechanisms, and sectoral coordination initiatives rather than in monetary policy or large-scale industrial policy formulation. This institutional configuration is consistent with second-best equilibrium logic (Rodrik, 2008): incremental institutional adjustment within constrained political-economic structures, focusing interventions where associational intermediation can meaningfully reduce coordination costs without requiring fundamental redistribution of policy authority.

3.3. Institutional Intermediation and Meso-Level Governance

Institutional economics further clarifies the role of business associations as intermediaries operating between state structures and market actors. North (1990) conceptualizes institutions as comprising formal rules (laws, regulations, contracts), informal norms (conventions, codes of conduct), and enforcement mechanisms that collectively structure economic interaction and reduce transaction costs. Organizations both operate within these rule systems and actively shape their evolution through collective action and norm diffusion.

Meso-level governance theory (McDermott et al., 2009) highlights the importance of such intermediary institutions in stabilizing interactions between macro-level policy frameworks and

micro-level firm behavior. Without effective intermediation, regulatory reforms may fail due to implementation gaps, informational asymmetries between policymakers and firms, or misalignment between policy design and operational realities.

3.4. Business Associations as Collective Action Platforms

Collective action theory (Olson, 1965) provides critical insight into the internal organizational dynamics of business associations. Because advocacy efforts produce collective goods that are non-excludable improved regulations benefit all sector participants regardless of association membership firms face incentives to free ride on others' contributions.

Empirical research demonstrates that associations combining advocacy with operational service delivery sustain more stable membership bases and financial sustainability than organizations focused exclusively on lobbying (Perez-Aleman, 2003). Tangible member services generate recurring value propositions that maintain engagement even when advocacy outcomes are uncertain or delayed.

3.5. State-Led Associational Ecosystems in Transition Economies

In post-transition contexts, the spontaneous emergence of strong, member-driven business associations is often constrained by historical legacies of centralized governance and weak horizontal trust among economic actors (Estrin & Prevezer, 2011). During planned economy periods, business organizations typically functioned as administrative transmission mechanisms rather than autonomous collective action platforms.

Azerbaijan's post-2015 reforms illustrate a coordinated ecosystem-building approach in which associations were systematically embedded within formal governance mechanisms rather than operating as peripheral civil society actors (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016). The Strategic Roadmaps explicitly assigned associations operational roles in sector upgrading strategies, incorporated association representatives into SME Agency collegial governance structures, and linked institutional development targets to measurable economic outcomes.

3.6. Gendered Access and Structural Inequalities

Institutional structures frequently interact with gendered patterns of asset distribution, social norms, and economic opportunity in ways that reproduce or amplify existing inequalities (Brush et al., 2009). Credit systems relying heavily on collateral requirements may systematically disadvantage women entrepreneurs in contexts where property ownership, land titles, and asset registration are unevenly distributed by gender (Marlow & Patton, 2005).

In Azerbaijan's post-2016 period, women's entrepreneurship associations participated in consultative processes that contributed to preferential lending program adjustments and targeted support mechanisms (World Bank, 2020). The observed increase in women's participation in SME lending suggests incremental mitigation of structural asymmetry through institutional intermediation. However, persistent socio-economic disparities across regions, sectors, and household structures indicate that associational intermediation functions within structural limits rather than eliminating inequality comprehensively.

4. Conceptual Framework and Research Propositions

Integrating the theoretical strands discussed above, this study conceptualizes business associations as meso-level institutional intermediaries operating within second-best environments characteristic of resource-dependent transition economies (Cravo & Piza, 2019). Their effectiveness is neither universal nor transformative, but rather domain-specific and contingent upon two critical factors: the degree of governance embedding within formal policy structures, and the operational capacity to deliver tangible member services alongside representational functions.

This conceptualization departs from conventional approaches that evaluate business support solely through service delivery metrics or treat associations as peripheral lobbying entities. Instead, it positions associations as components of institutional architecture that shape coordination mechanisms, stabilize expectations, and mediate information asymmetries between state agencies and dispersed firm populations. First, associational effectiveness exhibits domain-specific variation, achieving the highest impact in technical coordination areas while remaining peripheral in redistributive policy domains (Doner & Schneider, 2000). Technical coordination encompasses regulatory simplification, quality standards harmonization, certification processes, and export documentation facilitation areas where information aggregation and procedural alignment generate measurable efficiency gains.

Second, associations that combine advocacy functions with operational service delivery demonstrate superior organizational sustainability and measurable impact compared to purely representational entities (Perez-Aleman, 2003). This proposition draws on collective action theory's insight regarding selective incentives (Olson, M. 1965). Third, in transition economies characterized by weak spontaneous collective action traditions, state-facilitated associational ecosystem building can accelerate coordination mechanisms that would otherwise emerge slowly or incompletely (Estrin & Prevezer, 2011)

Fourth, institutionalized public-private dialogue mechanisms improve regulatory predictability and reduce compliance uncertainty by creating structured feedback channels between policymakers and firm populations (OECD, 2021). Fifth, gender-sensitive associational advocacy can contribute to incremental mitigation of structural financing asymmetries when embedded within broader institutional adjustment processes (Marlow & Patton, 2005; Brush et al., 2009).

5. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-method research design combining institutional process analysis with descriptive macroeconomic evaluation. The methodological approach reflects the structural and governance-oriented nature of the research questions, which center on institutional transformation processes rather than discrete intervention impacts amenable to experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation (Dvouletý et al., 2021).

5.1 Case Selection and Analytical Justification

Azerbaijan is treated as a structured single-case study situated within the broader analytical category of resource-dependent transition economies. The case offers several characteristics that enhance analytical leverage for examining state-led associational ecosystem building under

second-best conditions. First, Azerbaijan experienced a clearly identifiable structural shock through the 2014–2015 global oil price collapse (Sachs & Warner, 2001). Second, the government adopted comprehensive formal strategic reform instruments through the Strategic Roadmaps framework in December 2016 (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016).

5.2 Data Sources and Analytical Materials

The analysis integrates multiple documentaries and statistical sources. Primary policy documents include the Strategic Roadmaps adopted in December 2016 (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016). Implementation progress reports issued by the SME Development Agency (KOBIA, 2024) provide operational detail on institutional mechanisms, program deployment, and coordination activities. Annual reports and statistical bulletins from the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (Central Bank of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023) supply macroeconomic context. International comparative data drawn from World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2023) and World Bank Doing Business reports situate Azerbaijan's trajectory within regional and global contexts.

5.3. Analytical Framework and Proposition Evaluation

Each proposition developed in the conceptual framework is evaluated through domain-specific alignment assessment rather than aggregate impact attribution. Technical coordination domains are examined through regulatory simplification initiatives, quality certification processes such as the EU PGI designation for pomegranates (Goedhuys & Sleuwaegen, 2013), and export documentation facilitation mechanisms. Gendered financial access is evaluated through trends in women's participation in SME lending programs (World Bank, 2020). The adoption of the Strategic Roadmaps in December 2016 (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016) marked a systemic reconfiguration of Azerbaijan's SME governance structure, transforming fragmented sectoral programs into coordinated institutional architecture with embedded associational participation. Prior to this reform, business support initiatives were distributed across multiple ministries and agencies with limited horizontal coordination mechanisms or systematic feedback channels connecting firm-level experience to policy adjustment processes.

The SME Development Agency (KOBIA, 2024) emerged as the primary coordinating institution for SME policy implementation, consolidating functions previously dispersed across agencies while developing collegial governance mechanisms incorporating business association representatives. Beyond delivering financial subsidies and advisory services directly to firms, KOBIA established structured consultation processes through which associations participate in regulatory review discussions, program evaluation processes, sectoral bottleneck identification, and policy implementation feedback loops.

Formalization of public-private dialogue transformed episodic consultation into a systematic institutional mechanism with defined membership, regular convening schedules, documented agendas, and follow-up accountability structures (OECD, 2021). Prior to reform, government-business engagement occurred through irregular meetings convened at executive discretion without standardized procedures or outcome documentation.

Women's entrepreneurship associations evolved from informal networking platforms into formal policy intermediaries embedded within PPD structures. These associations documented gender-specific financing constraints arising from collateral requirements tied to property ownership

patterns⁷ and contributed to institutional adjustments in preferential lending programs, including reduced collateral thresholds, introduction of guaranteed schemes, and expansion of advisory support (World Bank, 2020).

6. Empirical Developments and Domain-Specific Effectiveness Assessment

6.1. SME Population Dynamics and Regulatory Environment

Administrative data indicate sustained growth in registered SME populations during the consolidation phase following initial institutional reforms. Between 2021 and 2024, officially registered SMEs increased from approximately 360,000 to 424,437 enterprises (KOBIA, 2024), representing roughly 18 percent cumulative growth over the three years. This expansion reflects multiple contributing factors operating simultaneously rather than any single intervention effect.

Post-pandemic economic normalization following COVID-19 disruptions created improved demand conditions and reduced uncertainty, encouraging entrepreneurial entry. Regulatory simplification measures reduce the administrative procedures required for business registration, with the digitization of registration processes lowering time costs and bureaucratic complexity (OECD, 219). Structured PPD mechanisms created channels through which associations identified redundant licensing requirements and overlapping permit systems, feeding into iterative regulatory refinement processes.

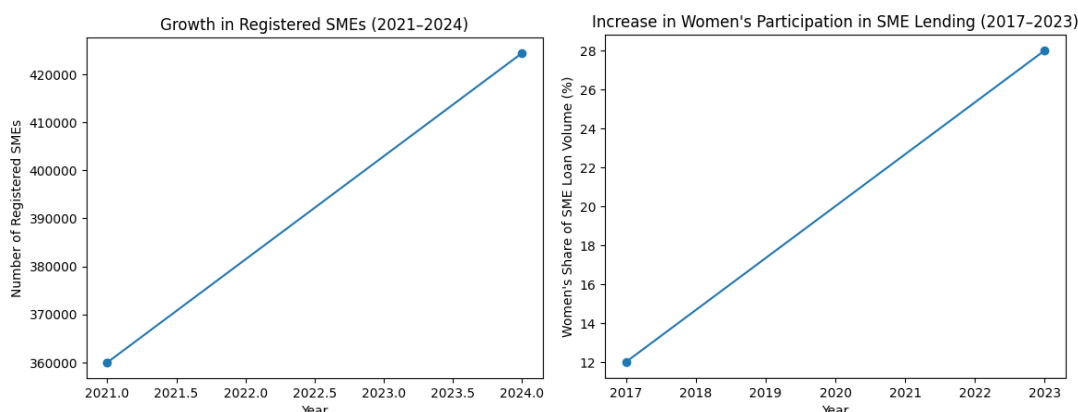


Figure 1. Growth in Registered SMEs (2021-2024) and Increase in Women’s Participation in SME Lending (2017-2023)

Source: SMBDA, 2024

6.2. Gendered Access to Finance and Institutional Adjustment

Prior to institutional reforms, SME lending practices relied heavily on collateral structures tied directly to immovable property ownership, reflecting standard risk management approaches in financial systems characterized by information asymmetries and limited credit history data (Stiglitz & Weiss, 1981). In contexts where property ownership and land title registration exhibit systematic gender disparities, collateral-dependent lending generates structural financing asymmetries that disadvantage women entrepreneurs regardless of business plan quality (Marlow & Patton, 2005).

Lending data indicate measurable shifts in women's participation in SME credit markets during the post-reform period. Between 2017 and 2023, the share of total SME loan volumes extended to women-led enterprises increased from approximately 12 percent to around 28 percent of

aggregate SME lending (World Bank, 2020). This trend substantially exceeds the pace of change observed in preceding years and aligns temporally with policy adjustments advocated through women's entrepreneurship associations. To situate Azerbaijan's state-led associational ecosystem building within broader regional patterns, comparative reference to neighboring post-Soviet transition economies illuminates distinct institutional pathway variations shaped by divergent political economy configurations, resource endowments, and reform strategies (Estrin & Prevezer, 2011; Schneider, 2004).

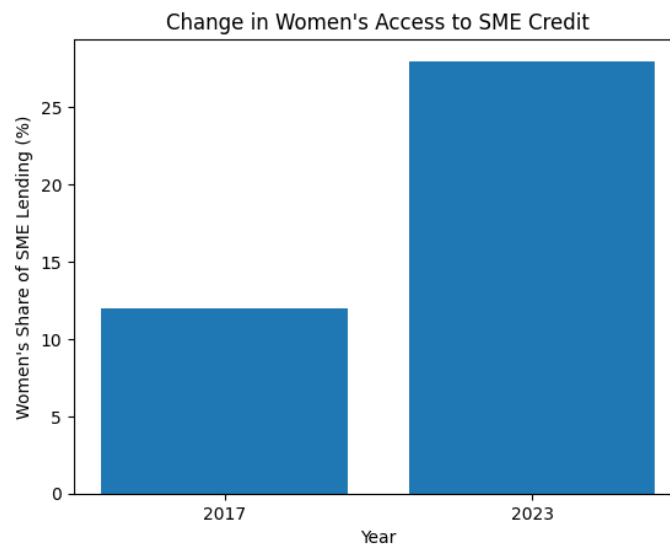


Figure 2. Change in Women's Access to SME Credit

Source: SMBDA, 2024

Kazakhstan pursues a state-dominant industrial policy model characterized by substantial reliance on centralized development banking institutions, large-scale sectoral investment programs, and direct state participation in strategic enterprises (Schneider, 2004). Georgia adopted an aggressive liberal deregulatory model emphasizing radical tax simplification, comprehensive business licensing elimination, one-stop registration systems, and property rights strengthening (OECD, 2019). Azerbaijan's hybrid approach occupies an intermediate position between Kazakhstan's centralized industrial dirigisme and Georgia's liberal minimalist framework.

Despite measurable coordination improvements documented across multiple domains, structural limits on associational influence remain clearly evident, reinforcing the second-best equilibrium interpretation¹ that frames this analysis. These limits are not implementation failures or temporary constraints pending further reform, but rather constitute inherent boundaries reflecting political economy configurations characteristic of centralized transition economies.

Without systematic associational participation in decision-making processes, fiscal policy authority including the determination of tax rates, budget allocation priorities, design of subsidy programs, and distribution of development fund resources remains concentrated within executive and ministerial structures (Rodrik, 2008). Similarly, associational negotiation does not apply to macroeconomic stabilisation policy, which includes monetary policy tools, currency rate management, inflation targeting frameworks, and balance of payments adjustment procedures (Central Bank of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023).

Instead of being entirely self-sustaining through member fees or the provision of commercial

services, financial sustainability trajectories continue to rely in part on state-supported programs, grant financing, and project-based resources (Perez-Aleman, 2003). Long-term autonomy necessitates a progressive shift toward member-driven financial sustainability, even while hybrid finance methods can offer stability during organizational development phases.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzes the evolving role of Business Support Organizations and business associations in Azerbaijan's post-2015 economic transformation. It conceptualizes these organizations as meso-level intermediaries operating in a resource-dependent transition economy seeking diversification under centralized governance. Moving beyond technical evaluations of business support programs, the research examines how associations contribute to broader ecosystem coordination in a context marked by limited spontaneous collective action and persistent market distortions. Following the adoption of the Strategic Roadmaps in 2016, Azerbaijan shifted from fragmented consultation toward more structured and institutionalized public–private dialogue. Business associations including national entrepreneur confederations, sector-specific agricultural exporter groups, and women's entrepreneurship networks were formally integrated into governance processes. The findings show that associations were most effective in technical and coordination-oriented domains, such as regulatory simplification, quality certification, export facilitation, and incorporating sector-specific expertise into policy design. However, their influence remained limited in redistributive areas like fiscal incentives, where decision-making authority remains highly centralized. The study highlights three main contributions. First, it positions business associations as core components of meso-level ecosystem infrastructure. Second, it demonstrates that state-led associational development can accelerate ecosystem formation where collective action traditions are weak. Third, it underscores that delivering tangible value is essential for associational sustainability. Overall, business associations play a meaningful but complementary role in Azerbaijan's diversification strategy.

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Feminist and Bourdieu-Based Perspectives on Inclusive Security in Latvia

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Abstract: *This paper examines Latvia's response to Russian influence following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, focusing on media restrictions and language reforms affecting the Russian-speaking minority. While these measures aim to strengthen national security, they risk deepening exclusion and reinforcing narratives of discrimination. Drawing on Anne Tickner's feminist international relations theory and Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology, the study argues that security is enhanced not only through defensive policies but also through inclusive identity construction. A historical review highlights Latvia's long experience of occupation, identity re-creation, and demographic transformation, including the legacy of Soviet-era migration. Approximately one-third of Latvia's population speaks Russian as a primary language, and a significant minority remains non-citizens. These conditions create vulnerabilities that external actors can exploit through disinformation and diaspora-based narratives. Using a feminist lens, the paper reframes security as multidimensional, emphasizing everyday experiences, citizenship, and social belonging. Incorporating Bourdieu's concept of the social field, it proposes integrative pathways such as multilingual education, expanded civic participation, and investment in shared cultural capital to embed Russian-speaking residents more fully within Latvian society. Such an approach reduces susceptibility to malign influence while strengthening democratic legitimacy and long-term national resilience.*

Keywords: *Latvia, Russia, minority, feminist, Bourdieu*

1. Introduction

After the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, states across the former Soviet Union feared they might be next on the list. Many states saw the ease of Russian operations in Ukraine being possible due to the assistance of loyal Russian speaking populations in the area (Bergmane, 2020). Latvia began efforts to curb the influence of Russia on the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia known as the *Krievi Latvijā*. These measures included a halt to retransmission of some Russian media sources, a program to replace these services with Latvian Russian language programming, and a controversial decision to significantly reduce the use of Russian in schools (Hodžić, n.d.). Russian media and state sources were quick to highlight what they described as exclusionary policies to a repressed Russian minority (TASS, 2018). This reaction could be seen as use of "Responsibility to Protect" norms set forth by the United States, to justify the activity of Russia in their near abroad.

Societies must take action to protect their selves in an environment where information technology reduces the cost and increases the impact of psychological trauma, whether coordinated or organically emerging. These adjustments are deliberate but not final – occurring at an increasingly rapid tempo and in a never-ending cycle. While protecting Latvia from the malign influence of Russia, the Government of Latvia must ensure its own protections do not lead to an opening for further disruptive interference. Restrictions to Russian language are not only a possible new vector of risk; they can also be seen as a risk to the legitimate rights of *Krievi Latvijā*. To prevent a self-fulfilling prophecy, this research asks: *What are the possibilities for the Latvian state to ethically recreate its identity regarding ethno-linguistic Russian minority to remove the vector of its destruction through possible Russian malign activities?*

A short historical review of the geographic, ethnic, cultural, and security of the region demonstrates the resilience of Latvian identity through its reimagining and deliberate creation. The factors leading to Latvian resiliency are critical to ensuring its survival in the future. Through the postmodern perspectives of Tickner’s feminism and Bourdieu’s sociology, a set of recommend solutions for future exploration are posited. While these proposals are not validated through full research yet, they demonstrate how a more visibly inclusive integrative approach could solidify *Krievi Latvijā* positions in the larger Latvian “social field,” reducing vulnerability to Latvian identity and physical security from external threats.

2. Background

The greater Baltic Sea region is cross-roads between east and west, northern Europe and Central, which created a heterogenous ethnic situation for centuries. The region was one of the last to convert to Christianity, maintaining its pagan roots well beyond other European regions, save for Lithuania. In the 13th century a variety of cultural groups including the Curonians, Semigallians, Selonians, Latgalians, and Livonians all inhabited the region. Vikings, the Hanseatic League, the Holy Roman, Swedish, and Russian empires all laid claim to portions of what is known as Latvia today. What Russia took from the Swedes, they gave to the Poles, and then got back (partially) again. Napoleon makes an (unsuccessful) appearance.

In the late 19th century, industrialization required engineering national political structures to aggregate state power. The mobilization of the national population led to a side effect of emergent national identities in cultural-ethnic groups as well. This led to the first of the Latvian National Awakenings, which would eventually transition to the *Jaunā strāva* or New Current socialist movement of the early 20th century. Even at this time, there was ideological competition of the ways to Latvian-ess, but the idea of a Latvian people was shared. During this period, some Russian inhabitants in the region saw themselves as one of many ethnic groups, bound to rise against the German nobles who controlled the area while still technically a part of the Russian Empire.

The states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were formed in the midst back-and-forth battles between White Russians, Germans, and then Red Russians. Latvians served in units of all forces, but the formative stage came in the waning days of the war with the establishment of national infantry forces, who fought to expel outside powers, which consisted mostly of communist Russians at this time (The Baltic Times, 2019). World War Two marked an extended interruption of independence with the establishment of a communist satellite state in the region, invasion by Nazi Germany, and then retaken by Soviet forces. Despite these endless bloody tradeoffs, or

perhaps because of them, Latvians maintained their identity.

Latvians remained behind the Iron Curtain but were provided special disposition in some ways. The Soviets used the seaside region as a playground and showcase for the supposed superiority of communism. However, these minor advantages were outweighed by massive relocation programs, bringing in ethnic Russians and pulling out Latvians attempting to build trans-union cohesion. Resistance, while ultimately ineffective, lived on through the “Forest Brothers,” losing about 3,000 of their number to combat or execution in the years between 1948 and 1957’s operations (LSM, 2018). The last of the Forest Brothers is said to have only emerged in 1995. The persistence and reemergence of Forest Brother narratives is another artifact of the latest reinforcement of Latvian national identity in response to an external threat.

The end of the Cold War in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania ended mostly with a song, not a bang. In a masterful campaign of soft power, opposition groups in these countries began highlighting components of Soviet Occupation. In June 1986, Latvians remembered the Soviet deportations of 1941, and then repeated the feat with their neighbors again in August (Baltic Way, 2021). These symbolic gestures began again until in August 1989 when over 2 million people joined hands across the three nations as a sign of Baltic solidarity. This led to the USSR admission of illegality of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact which provided a path to reestablishing independence.

The legacy of the Cold War resettlement remains in Latvia, where about 30% of the population speaks Russian as their primary language. Because of the Latvian constitution’s effort to preserve national identity, descendants of Russian relocation were not given automatic citizenship, even though many Russian speakers migrated prior to the establishment of the Soviet state. Approximately 11% percent of the population remains without Latvian citizenship, instead receiving only “nationality”. After Russia occupied Crimea with little resistance many became concerned that this would be repeated in northern Europe. Election of a right-of-center government in Latvia led to banning Russian based education in many schools. These events left some, but not all, Russians in the region feeling disenfranchised (Kim, 2018). The government and media in Russia latched on to these stories as evidence of Russian discrimination. No stranger to psychological warfare, the Russian government reinforced this narrative, in a reinterpretation of responsibility-to-protect doctrine, trying to establish itself as a great power looking after its diaspora.

While period includes great physical violence, it is also marked throughout by the struggle, mutation, creation, and recreation of identity, meaning, and narrative. While these concepts seem abstract, there are very objective consequences for those involved. As the world is increasingly connected to information, the potential for context change is real. To remain relevant, states will need to play an increasingly active role in reimagining their identities. Because tools of constructivism, critical theory, and post-modernism emphasize meaning, they are particularly useful in issues of identity. In particular, the feminist work of Anne Tickner and the sociological perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu can be leverage toward better understanding and action in the situation of Latvia and its Russian minority.

2.1. Analysis through Tickner’s Feminist Approach

Feminism international relations theory is a diverse field that is naturally skeptical of proscribed methodologies and is inclusive of other fields (Tickner, 1997, 620). The more general field of feminism is thought to consist of three to four major phases, or waves, that progressively

reinterpret women's place in society. As Tickner states, one of the most essential questions of feminism IR theory are to ask, "where are the women?" In this regard, there is some good news, in that women make up nearly half of Latvia's workforce, as well as a workforce participation rate amongst females that is at nearly 75%. While women's representation in the workplace is one of the highest in Europe, its representation in government is less evident. Although Latvia is one of the few countries that can celebrate a woman President and Prime Minister, their representation in the legislative Saima is less than 10-20% on average. However, a good argument could be made that women are represented to a greater degree than in many other countries.

In the region, including nearby Finland and Sweden, nations are incorporating feminist foreign and defense policy, including inclusion in institutions such as NATO, the EU, and the OSCE. This provides additional justification for those attempting a feminist perspective in domestic and foreign policy. Tickner does warn that a stereotypical association between women and peace movements paints women as naïve and is ultimately an unhelpful assertion of women's "nature" (Tickner, 1997). Moreover, she reveals that feminism opposes false dichotomies that place women and other groups in a subordinate position of hierarchy, while men are socialized into positions of greater authority, subjectively and objectively (Tickner, 1997, 621). Once socialized, each gender plays the role of its stereotype, meaning that male dominated institutions are more likely to emphasize power, rationality, and knowledge. It is a mistake to see feminist security approaches as "soft". For example, feminist foreign policies delivered Sweden and Finland into NATO in 2022. Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin delivered some of the clearest messages in the Russian invasion of Ukraine stating, "the way out of the conflict is for Russia to leave Ukraine" (Sharma 2022).

Despite eschewing an automatic association with peace movements, Tickner does highlight the role of feminism in more hermeneutic or conversation forms of engagement. Therefore, feminist do not begin with the assumption that what is current is natural in the world. Instead, they seek "voices of the disempowered and marginalized not previously heard" (Tickner, 1997, 623). Clearly feminism can be located in discussions of policy and security, but what about the issue of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia?

Feminism highlights important areas for the Latvian Russian minority issue. For example, the dominant security narrative is more likely to highlight that one third of the country speaks Russian, not that approximately 1/3 of that number (or 10% of the population) have a noticeable affinity for Russian policy. This is a much less threatening position that feminism would likely uncover and give voice to. Feminism is also more likely to acknowledge other anthropological and cultural observations that would reduce tension, such as Dr. Indra Ekmanis' (2020), highlights of "banal integration". In her work, she highlights the clear economic disparities from one side of the border to the other, a continuous high rate of marriage between Latvian and Russian speaking individuals, the rise of Latvian language use among Latvian speakers, and the sheer predictability that a city such as Daugavpils would vote to speak Russian, not as a matter of loyalty, but one of practicality. In each of these cases, feminism presents an alternate interpretation to the dominant narrative than a realist or even liberal perspective might highlight.

Many traditional approaches to international relations might miss factors such as banal integration because they do not describe classical sources of power or values. As Tickner (1997) points out, feminism takes a non-enlightenment and non-structural approach to security. Instead, feminist "define security broadly in multidimensional and multilevel terms." What matters to people, might

be personal or communal, and can cover a range of physical, social, psychological, economic, environmental, and other factors that affect life and its quality (Tickner, 1997, 624). While feminist acknowledge power and hierarchy, they are skeptical about the norms of these constructs produce because of the inequality they impose. Practically speaking inequality in hierarchy was first experienced by the Soviet domination of the Latvians. A feminist researcher might claim that this collective trauma is being unjustly transferred to the symbolic remainder of their previous oppressors, especially by a male dominated (right, realist) legislature. Correcting this inequality would be a priority to provide legitimacy of the state. This might be more likely to be achieved as justification for greater gender equality in the Saima.

Tickner (1997) also points out that feminist theorists are likely more concerned with consequences than causes as primary areas of conflict study. A focus on the impacts of Russian minority population might reveal the consequences “between the public and private spheres” which could reveal vectors of future Russian reinforcement. At the intersection of public and private is the role of the citizen - the individual’s rights and responsibilities in the realm of the social. Historically excluded from full citizenship, the feminist perspective would recognize the disenfranchisement of “stateless” individuals and look for ways to reconcile that. This is especially true since Russian minorities are excluded from voting, state service, and the military – areas which women have also been historically excluded. By invoking the protector / protected dichotomy, an important analogy emerges. In feminism, women are subject to decreased agency and self-esteem by their placement in the inferior “protected” role (Tickner, 1997, 628). Similarly, it could be argued that a stateless Russia-speaking minority suffers from similar suppression, increasing their vulnerability to disinformation and narratives of pan-Russo solidarity. Their exclusion from the in-group makes them vulnerable to the allure of an external out-group and creates an obstacle to state cohesion.

When Tickner critically reconstructs Morgenthau’s perspectives on political realism, she makes several conclusions about a feminist reformulation. First, she notes that a feminist perspective requires dynamic objectivity that responds to the environment with either development or domination, as the situation warrants. This requires multidimensionality and contextual contingency, using cooperation as a norm and exercise of power as a last resort. Because power is overtly masculine, it disturbs balance and subjugates the potential for collective improvement. Unlike traditional realism, a feminist reformulation asserts that every political action communicates a moral position. Since morality is non-universal, a process of exploration and alignment must be undertaken to find areas of commonality for compromise. In doing so, it becomes necessary to connect these moral elements to their source, the concerns of all people. From this perspective, a feminist approach would recommend a more inclusive approach to Latvia’s Russian minority situation (Tickner, 1988).

2.2. Analysis through Bourdieu Sociological Approach

The relational nature of elements discussed in feminist analysis is echoed in the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The references in this section are taken from his lectures from 1989-1992 (Bourdieu, 2014). Like feminists, he believed that structures are not universal or natural, rather they are constructed. Bourdieu recognized that social hierarchies were an inescapable reality of social existence. Moreover, he believed that once established, these hierarchies reproduce through the rituals, systems, and institutions that were their artifacts of social power.

Latvia's location on the pathway of conquerors put its structures in continual competition with external audiences. As with competition in other systems, adaptation was a key component for survival. Bourdieu's contribution is that he believed that adaptation was a product not of just mutation of social systems, but rather the deliberate decisions by agents to create change. This is a critical point to the problem at hand because it allows for the survival of a Latvian identity, without sticking to a singular, rigid definition of that identity.

Historically speaking, we see that with each iteration of *Latvian Awakening* the structures that emerge were a product of tied to the particularities of alignment with other structures in the environment. The building-block of this social construction are *fields*, which represent the arrayment of agents in relation to other agents, but also the relationship of fields amongst each other.

The characteristics of fields are created through the struggle between agents to occupy the dominant space in the field. In the situation of the Latvian Russian-speaking minority, it could be argued that there is a cycle of field adjustments occurring between different levels of realization. On one hand there is an internal field struggle to define what is Latvian and what is not. From a historical perspective, this is neither a new nor static situation. For example, the aggregation of 13th century ethnic groups into a Latvian people is one example of an internal field arrayment. The exclusion of Russo-slavic people into this group is likely the consequence of the inter-field struggle between the "Latvian field" and the reappearing Russian field. The proximity of the Russian field "pulls" Latvian Russian-speaking minorities implicitly and explicitly. The major mistake here is identifying language as the discriminating factor, rather than the values of individuals and communities. When this mistake occurs, then self-fulfilling prophetic fields actual grow through interaction. In other words, through exclusion of Russian-speakers, Latvian policy makers run the risk of creating the "out-group" they feared in the first place.

A major concern of Bourdieu's was resolving dichotomies phenomenon, such as the objective and the subjective. He posits that objective structures of social systems can be passed on to the subjective minds of the agents in the system. When a balance is struck between these elements a doxic relationship is created. Doxa represent the deep and otherwise unconscious understanding of the agent passed on from generation to generation, in a process known as social reproduction. From an application perspective, there is a doxic, but vulnerable, relationship between the states and the Russian minority based on trust. To maintain Latvian identity, the state suppresses the use of the Russian language. In doing so, the state creates an otherness which self-referentially justifies its decisions. In other words, in their response the Latvian government may have created a "toxic" doxic.

As quoted at the beginning of this paper, Bourdieu believes that states, not individuals hold the primary responsibility for creating social realities. Blending with the feminist perspective, I posit that the responsibility is to build ethical and effective creations. The Latvian Third Awakening was marked by a separation from Soviet control, with recognition of Latvian traditions as they were understood by the collective memory. This memory was influenced by the narratives (social / cultural capital) of the previous awakenings. However, one could be a Russian-speaking minority living in Latvia and agree with the idea of separation from the USSR. The movement was as influenced by place and values rather than blood or language, making it more inclusive than some contemporary definitions of identity.

With the move toward European integration through the EU and NATO, the Latvian field is

influenced by a wide variety of external fields which include based on ideas such as multilateralism, transatlantic cooperation, and a multiplicity of liberally generated political views. Each of these factors influences the Latvian field, especially in the realm of who is out and who is in. Whether the third awakening is ongoing, or a fourth is underway, it might be asked whether masculine narratives such as the Laplecijas (Bear slayer) narrative are becoming more prevalent over the more feminine Daina (song story) traditions, as a symbolic reflection or signal to the commitment to collective security. Likewise, “harder” social policies such as moves to accelerate the influence of Russian culture might be influenced as much by western fields as eastern ones, or internal Latvian field struggles.

Field influences are not a necessarily a threat, but they will almost always have an influence through the exchange of capital. As power is described earlier by Tickner, Bourdieu also takes a wider approach to capital, adding social, symbolic, informational, and cultural to the economic. He calls the state, “the Bank of Social Capital,” responsible for its investments in relationships. Here he might even partner with Tickner to call for greater women’s participation in investment strategies, as they are responsible for the “invisible work” of social maintenance in most societies (Bourdieu, 2014, 239-241). Combining his and the feminist perspective in another way, the Latvian government may need to find more nuanced approaches to maintain the relative stability of the relationship between the Russian minority and the Latvian identity, if they are to gain stronger long-term coherence. By blending Bourdieu’s concepts and feminist perspectives, we can propose pathways forward that are not just “congruent with their particular interests until a certain period of time” (Bourdieu, 2014, 175) but congruent with everyone’s interests, over durable periods of time.

3. Discussion

On one hand, feminist perspectives are skeptical of the existing hierarchies exerting power, especially when they are exclusionary to certain groups. There is hope in implementing a feminist informed agenda in Latvia, as it maintains some leading indices of female inclusion in Europe. A feminist perspective would hopefully recognize the Russian minority as stuck between a patriarchal rock and a hard place, with the rolling boulder of Russian conservatism the one to avoid. Feminism should recognize that Latvia and European Union present a stronger chance not just of women’s actualization, but for better opportunities for the Russian speaking minority in general. However, feminism would also recognize that policies that appear to target Russian-speakers need to instead increase inclusiveness and participation. The feminist approach is empathetic to the marginalized and seeks their emancipation, yet it does not do so if emancipation leads to greater suffering.

Meanwhile, Bourdieu’s perspective sets the responsibility for reality creation squarely in the state’s area of responsibility. Russia uses state means to create new social realities, actively expending capital to reshape fields and form new doxa. The Latvian government has done so as well. They have even attempted to frame their language reforms as a beneficial to the minority population by providing better educational opportunities and occupational access. But it is difficult to appeal to better angels when the state’s actions make daily life more uncomfortable for the agents in the field. To paraphrase Tickner’s perspective on the use of power, non-cooperative disturbance of internal field coherence should be the choice of last resort, not the first.

People are not unaware of the dynamic for change, or are they necessarily opposed to being convinced of different pathways. However, people generally want to retain their agency when those changes are made. When done truthfully and transparently, states should not fear field adjustments. However, alluring “spin” may be, eventually it can create a crack that is vulnerable to countering capital investments. This is Russia’s recent advantage but also its weakness. It has found the activities in western culture that are out of alignment with the espoused values of the liberal order. In the short term, this helps legitimize itself to fence sitters. However, the grass is not greener on the other side of the border and that difference can be used as an honest assessment and communication of the value of Latvian, European, and Western fields.

While these propositions are framed as recommendations for action, they have yet to have been rigorously explored. Therefore, they should be approached more like a research proposal than fully formed calls to action. With that in mind here are some concrete steps for future exploration:

The first proposal is to “De- weaponize” not “re-weaponize” language by creating educational requirements that are focused on multilingual proficiencies, not a single language. The current approach attempts to increase the field of Latvian culture, by reducing the social and economic capital of the Russian language. An alternate approach might have paired mandatory second or third language instruction, with a proficiency requirement slightly less than the Latvian language. Another option would be to alternate language by school year in these areas, so that a co-development could occur. By focusing on multilingual education, Russia might have become one among many secondary languages, instead of having the appearance of being targeted. As other ideas are introduced, additional language measures will be highlighted.

The second recommendation is to create Trans-Baltic and Trans-European Russian Integration Groups (RIG) to help coordinate Russian communications with a western orientation. In the former Soviet Union, Russian is the *lingua-ruskyi* of especially certain generations. Historically, Russia has sponsored these groups to highlight symbolic and physical inequalities in these nations, causing divisions. However, if former Soviet states could form or reinforce their own Russian language groups, they might possibly change the narrative. While it might be a slow build, highlighting the advantages of generations of Russian speakers outside of Russia could help showcase liberal advantages. These groups may also prove to be a pathway toward reconciliation of actual wounds of division. Third, it may have the advantage of highlighting the possibilities of a more liberal Russia. This is a particularly important consideration if Russia’s invasion of Ukraine leads to a collapse of the current regime. The resulting internal instability will require tools to create a better version of Russia.

The third recommendation is to spend *social capital on cultural embrace*. Through transnational and national cultural integration groups, measures can be taken or reinforced to integrate producers and consumers of cultural and social capital. Reducing the means for negative media transmission from Russian sources was the right decision for the Latvian government. Ideally, they would have been prepared to substitute the loss with positive sources, which they are working diligently to create currently. Transmission is not the issue, but content is. In a country that is closely linked to arts of all type, especially music provides a tremendous opportunity. Sponsoring artists from the Russian-speaking population with grants to shape truthful narratives. Identifying Russian-speaking contributors with western values as artifacts and creators of content is critical.

4. Conclusions

The story of Latvia is marked by the intersection of communities which have combined through force or peace for hundreds of years. The resilience of Latvian culture is a testament to its durability, but also its flexibility. The strength of Latvian people is knowing when to fight and when to adapt. As the world continues to change, but at a rapidly increasing pace, the tempo of adaption will need to change with it. If the nation steers itself too far to one extreme or another, it may experience difficult consequences. However, there is every indication that the Latvian people and government are more than up to the challenge. This paper does not mean to imply that the Latvian government does not understand the sensitivity of this issue, are not already acting responsibly or cautiously. However, it does look to apply schools of thought applicable to the situation to provide an outsider's perspective. It also highlights how this otherwise domestic issue is usurped by external players, creating a difficult two-level game for Latvia. If that was not hard enough, Latvia must also consider the impact of oversimplified understandings of the situation common in some circles, especially the United States. In fact, despite the concern of western defense and media circles, things remain quite stable in eastern Latvia. Latvia Public Media's (LSM) Mike Collier pointed out that the biggest problem with Latgalians is their "stubborn loyalty" to Latvia. Latvia's Russians are no fools – they understand that life is better for them than their relatives on the other side of the border. He goes on to say that "with seminars and briefings on a weekly basis talking up the threat posed by Kremlin "hybrid warfare" and disinformation, we should be impressed that despite being bombarded with such nonsense, Latvia's Russians are remarkably resilient to it" (Collier, 2014). Ann Tickner might ascribe this resilience to the participation of women in visible ways throughout Latvia. Bourdieu might talk about the transfer and storage of capital by adaptive fields. While the past informs the present, it cannot guarantee the future. While Bourdieu highlights those states produce the social construction of the future, he would also acknowledge that smart investments of capital are needed to respond to changing field configurations. The key to the future is to ensure that responses are inclusive not just in their scope, but their integration as a true part of Latvian society. Post-modern, constructivist, feminist, and other integrative tools are useful tools to maintain fair, equitable, and cohesive societies, in Latvia and elsewhere. As Sweden and Finland's feminist-informed leaders have shown, when the time to fight comes, it is better to do it together, held together by our values, not our ethnicities.

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Gender Dimension in the Implementation of Social Service Policy

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Abstract: Social service policy produces different outcomes when viewed through a gender lens. Women are more likely to work in informal and low-paid jobs and to bear the burden of unpaid care work, which limits their full access to social insurance mechanisms. Consequently, compared to men, they face a higher risk of poverty and encounter more barriers in accessing social protection measures. Effective implementation requires addressing gender-specific risks, such as unpaid care work, informal employment, and discrimination, to promote equality. Key aspects include ensuring women's access to benefits, enhancing their economic empowerment, and challenging traditional gender norms. Gender-sensitive social service policies are crucial for reducing inequalities, as women are disproportionately represented in informal employment, have lower labor market participation, and carry the majority of unpaid care responsibilities, all of which expose them to higher poverty risks.

Keywords: Gender inequality, unpaid care work, informal employment, social protection, poverty risk, sustainable social development

1. Introduction

Social service policies play a central role in reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion, yet their impacts are not gender neutral. Structural differences in labor market participation, income levels, and caregiving responsibilities mean that women and men experience social protection systems in unequal ways (Rustamova et al., 2025). Women's overrepresentation in informal and low-paid employment, combined with their disproportionate share of unpaid care work, limits their access to contributory social insurance schemes and increases their vulnerability to poverty (Ulrichs, 2016). Therefore, integrating a gender perspective into social service policy design and implementation is essential to ensure equitable access, address gender-specific risks, and promote inclusive and sustainable social protection outcomes (Hassim & Razavi, 2006).

In this article, we conduct a gender-based analysis of social service policies, focusing on how structural inequalities in labor market participation, the prevalence of informal employment, and the unequal distribution of unpaid care work influence women's access to social protection mechanisms. The study further evaluates the extent to which existing policy frameworks address gender-specific risks and identifies key principles for the development and implementation of gender-sensitive social service policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social equity.

2. Integrating Gender in Social Service Policy Implementation

Effective policies should incorporate gender analysis, address structural inequalities, and promote equal social protection to ensure equal rights and access for all genders (Camilletti, 2021). One of the central gender dimensions in social service policy is the burden of unpaid care work. Women's disproportionate responsibility for caregiving tasks often leads to career interruptions and reduced contribution-based social benefits (Razavi & Staab, 2018; Goldblatt, 2016).

Another important aspect concerns labor market gaps. Women are frequently overrepresented in informal employment, which leaves them vulnerable and exposes them to wage gaps that reduce social insurance accumulation (Kabeer, 2014; Ulrichs, 2016). As of 2023–2024, the global labor force participation rate for women remains significantly lower than for men, with women's participation at approximately 47–49% compared to 72–73% for men (Heath et al, 2024).

Mathematical modelling can offer insights for forecasting and policy evaluation to address gender differences in social protection and labour force participation. It is possible to depict women's and men's labour force participation (LFP), employment, unemployment, and social security coverage as dynamic variables over time, impacted by structural elements including unpaid care work, informal employment, and educational attainment. Due to their disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, women frequently experience employment disruptions, lesser coverage of social security programs, and decreased contributions to social insurance (Razavi & Staab, 2018; Goldblatt, 2016; Kabeer, 2014; Ulrichs, 2016). Predictive models that anticipate future labour market outcomes and the possible impact of focused actions can incorporate these structural inequities.

One suitable approach is a system dynamics model, which simulates the flows of women and men between states of unpaid care, formal and informal employment, and social protection coverage. For example, the change in women's labor force participation ($L_{w,t}$) over time can be modeled as a function of the reduction in care work burden and informal employment:

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dL_w}{dt} &= \alpha(1 - L_w) - \beta C_w \\ \frac{dE_w}{dt} &= \gamma L_w - \delta I_w\end{aligned}$$

where C_w represents care work burden, I_w represents informal employment, and $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$ are sensitivity parameters. These equations allow simulation of various policy scenarios, such as expanding childcare services, formalizing informal work, or improving educational access.

Alternatively, a logistic growth model can project women's labor force participation under

different policy conditions:

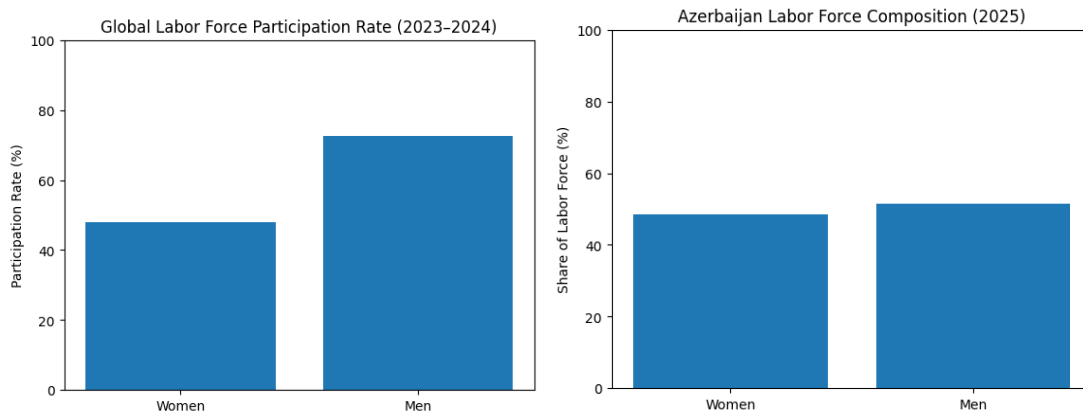
$$L_{w,t+1} = \frac{L_{\max}}{1 + e^{-k(t-t_0) + \theta P_t}}$$

where L_{\max} is the maximum achievable participation, k is the natural growth rate, and P_t captures the intensity of policy interventions. Applying these models to Azerbaijan’s current data (women comprise 48.4% of the labor force in 2025) enables forecasting for 2026–2030 and evaluating the effectiveness of gender-sensitive policies. Scenario simulations indicate that combining reduced care burdens, formalization of informal work, and enhanced education could increase women’s labor force participation substantially, improving equity and social protection coverage over time.

As of January 1, 2025, men made up 51.6 percent of Azerbaijan's labour force, while women made up 48.4 percent (Figure 1). Women made up 48.0 percent of all employed people, while men made up 52.0 percent. 17.3 percent of women and 17.0 percent of men in the working population had a postsecondary education. Of the overall number of unemployed people, women made up 55.6%. According to the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2025), the national unemployment rate was 4.6% for males and 6.1% for women.

In 2024, the average monthly nominal wage for women amounted to 791.1 manat, compared to 1159.9 manat for men. In 2015, women’s average monthly nominal earnings represented 53.9 percent of those of men, whereas by 2024 this ratio had increased to 68.2 percent (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024).

Ensuring gender equality in the implementation of social service policy requires strategic measures such as the expansion of childcare facilities and daycare centers. This issue is particularly significant from both a social justice and an economic development perspective (Shaver, 2018).



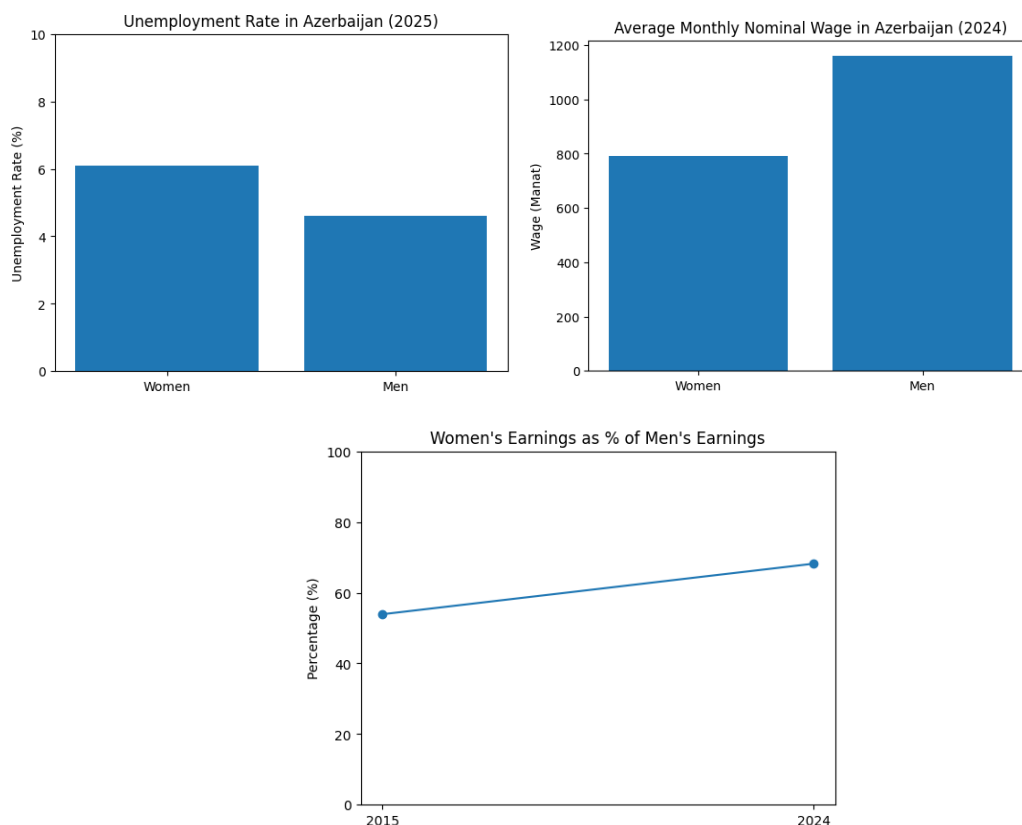


Figure 1. Azerbaijan's Labor Market Dynamics (2015–2025): A gender-disaggregated view of employment and earnings.

Source: State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025

Accessible childcare and daycare systems facilitate women's return to work, reduce career interruptions, strengthen women's economic independence, and contribute to narrowing gender-based wage disparities. Expanding these systems is not merely a social service intervention but also a key mechanism for institutionalizing gender equality (Cookson & Barrantes, 2024). Measures in this direction enhance women's economic participation, improve family well-being, and support sustainable social development (Kuss & Cookson, 2026).

Experiences from numerous countries demonstrate that the expansion of early childhood care services significantly increases women's employment. A broader childcare network also improves access to early education for children from low-income families and provides support to single-parent households (Bennett, 2008). This, in turn, promotes social equity and ensures a fair distribution of opportunities.

3. Accessibility of Childcare Services and Gender Equality in Azerbaijan

The accessibility of childcare services positively influences fertility rates, addresses demographic challenges, and enhances the social security of young families. To ensure effective gender equality:

1. Partnerships between the public and private sectors should be expanded;
2. The network of childcare facilities, particularly in rural areas, should be increased;

3. Quality standards for daycare centers should be established.

In Azerbaijan, early childhood care and social support services are provided by both public and non-governmental sectors in various forms to ensure children's health, development, well-being, and strong support within the family environment (Gurbanova, 2025). These services primarily focus on supporting early development during the 0–6 age period. The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Social Services (2011) establishes the legal foundations for social services in the country.

The Social-Economic Development Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2022–2026 (2022) aims to improve the quality of social services. Its key priorities include:

- Establishing and networking social service institutions, including daycare centers and care facilities;
- Expanding social services for children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups;
- Organizing social and psychological support for at-risk families and applying innovative social work methods, as outlined in the State Program on the Development of Social Services in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2023–2026.

The Strategy on Children of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2020–2030 serves as a long-term plan for state child policy. Additionally, the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (Men and Women) for 2026–2028, approved on December 29, 2025, represents the next three-year strategic document to ensure gender equality in the country.

In addition, as an institutional mechanism, the Child and Family Support Centers under the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Issues implement social support programs aimed at addressing children's developmental challenges (Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2006).

4. The Beijing Platform for Action and Early Childhood Care

For comparison, in Turkey, early childhood care and social support services are primarily provided by the Ministry of Family and Social Services, the Ministry of National Education, and local municipalities. The ministries develop social support and early education policies, while municipalities establish affordable or free daycare centers, particularly for low-income families.

Given the historically low levels of women's labor market participation, workplace childcare facilities are encouraged, and there are legal obligations for large enterprises to provide onsite childcare. In particular, the number of municipal kindergartens has increased in major cities.

Daycare centers provide services under special programs for single-parent households, low-income families, refugee and migrant families, and children with disabilities. According to Turkish labor legislation, enterprises with a certain number of female employees are required to organize childcare services.

In Western Europe (France, Germany, the Netherlands), the model is characterized by:

- Joint provision of services by the public and private sectors;
- Early childhood education and childcare may be organized as separate services;
- State subsidies are provided based on family income.

5. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Childcare Services

Early childhood care and social support services constitute a structural nexus linking women's poverty, economic development, and early socialization processes. International normative frameworks, particularly the *Beijing Platform for Action* (United Nations, 1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW; United Nations, 1979), explicitly situate childcare within broader strategies for gender equality and socio-economic transformation. When analyzed comparatively between Turkey and Western Europe, differences in welfare regime design reveal how childcare policy shapes women's economic autonomy and long-term social equity.

The *Beijing Platform for Action*, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (United Nations, 1995), identifies women's poverty as structurally linked to limited access to employment and the unequal distribution of unpaid care work. In its strategic objectives under "Women and Poverty" and "Women and the Economy," the Platform calls for strengthening social infrastructure including childcare services to expand women's labor market participation and reduce economic dependency (United Nations, 1995). The document makes clear that gender equality cannot be achieved without policies that reconcile work and family life. Thus, childcare is framed not as social assistance but as enabling economic infrastructure.

Similarly, CEDAW establishes binding legal obligations for States Parties. Article 11 requires states to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination in employment and to develop social services that enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities (United Nations, 1979, Art. 11(2)(c)). Article 5 emphasizes the modification of stereotyped gender roles within the family, while Article 13 addresses equal participation in economic and social life. The CEDAW Committee has repeatedly stressed in its concluding observations that accessible and affordable childcare is essential to achieving substantive (de facto) equality (CEDAW Committee, various concluding observations). In this framework, the absence of childcare constitutes a form of indirect discrimination because it disproportionately constrains women's economic activity.

The relationship between childcare and women's poverty operates through labor market participation. Empirical welfare state research demonstrates that in countries with extensive public childcare systems, particularly in Nordic and Western European contexts female employment rates are significantly higher, and gender wage gaps are comparatively narrower (OECD, 2023; Esping-Andersen, 1999). These systems reduce women's dependency on family-based support by socializing care responsibilities. Ann Shola Orloff conceptualizes this dynamic through the notion of "defamilization," defined as the degree to which social policies allow individuals, especially women, to maintain a livelihood independent of familial relations (Orloff, 1993). In welfare states with high defamilization, childcare services function as institutional mechanisms that enable women's full citizenship and economic autonomy.

In contrast, more familialist welfare arrangements such as those historically characteristic of Turkey allocate primary responsibility for care to the household. Although Turkey has expanded preschool education in recent years, public childcare coverage for children under three remains comparatively limited, and informal care networks continue to play a central role (OECD, 2022). This structure constrains women's continuous labor market participation and contributes to higher rates of part-time or informal employment. As feminist social policy scholars argue, when

unpaid care work is insufficiently recognized in social protection systems, women face long-term economic disadvantages, including lower lifetime earnings and weaker pension entitlements (Bennett, 2013).

Fran Bennett emphasizes that social security and income maintenance systems, though formally gender-neutral, often fail to account adequately for unpaid care work and may reinforce economic dependency if benefits are structured around family-based entitlements rather than individual rights (Bennett, 2013). From this perspective, childcare expansion is not only a labor market policy but also a mechanism for restructuring gendered social rights.

Education plays a critical intergenerational role within this framework. Early childhood education contributes to children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby reducing long-term inequality (Heckman, 2006). At the same time, early education institutions function as spaces of early socialization where gender norms and social expectations are shaped. The *Beijing Platform for Action* highlights equal access to education for girls and the expansion of early childhood opportunities as strategic priorities for building social equity from an early age (United Nations, 1995). Thus, investment in childcare simultaneously promotes women's immediate economic participation and long-term social development outcomes. From a macroeconomic perspective, increasing women's labor force participation through childcare provision contributes to national productivity growth and poverty reduction (OECD, 2023). Dual-earner households are less vulnerable to income shocks, and diversified labor market participation enhances economic resilience. Consequently, childcare services generate both micro-level empowerment effects and macro-level development dividends.

In comparative terms, Western European welfare states, particularly social-democratic regimes have more systematically integrated childcare into social investment strategies, recognizing its role in gender equality and economic sustainability. Turkey, despite formal commitments under CEDAW and adherence to the Beijing framework, continues to face structural challenges rooted in familialist policy traditions and uneven service provision. Bridging this gap requires not only quantitative expansion of childcare facilities but also qualitative transformation in policy design, including individualization of social rights and redistribution of unpaid care work.

In sum, early childhood care services constitute a critical institutional link between women's poverty reduction, economic development, and early socialization. International legal and policy frameworks establish childcare as both a gender equality obligation and a development strategy. Comparative evidence demonstrates that where childcare is institutionalized as public infrastructure, women's economic autonomy expands and intergenerational inequalities diminish. Without such structural investment, gender disparities persist, and sustainable socio-economic development remains constrained.

6. Conclusions

Social service policies cannot be considered effective if they overlook the structural realities that shape women's economic lives. Although legal frameworks often guarantee equal rights, persistent differences in labor market participation, wage levels, and care responsibilities continue to produce unequal outcomes. Women's concentration in informal or lower-paid employment, together with their disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, restricts their

access to contributory social insurance and increases their exposure to poverty over the life course.

The findings highlight that childcare services are not simply supportive social measures but core components of gender-equitable development policy. Accessible and affordable early childhood care enables women to maintain continuous employment, strengthens their income security, and contributes to narrowing wage disparities. At the same time, quality early education enhances children's developmental outcomes and promotes more equal opportunities from an early age, thereby addressing intergenerational dimensions of inequality. For Azerbaijan, advancing gender-sensitive social protection requires sustained investment in childcare infrastructure, reduction of regional disparities, and integration of gender analysis into policy implementation. Without structural reforms that recognize and redistribute unpaid care work, poverty reduction strategies will remain incomplete. Strengthening early childhood care systems is therefore essential for achieving inclusive growth, social equity, and long-term socio-economic stability.

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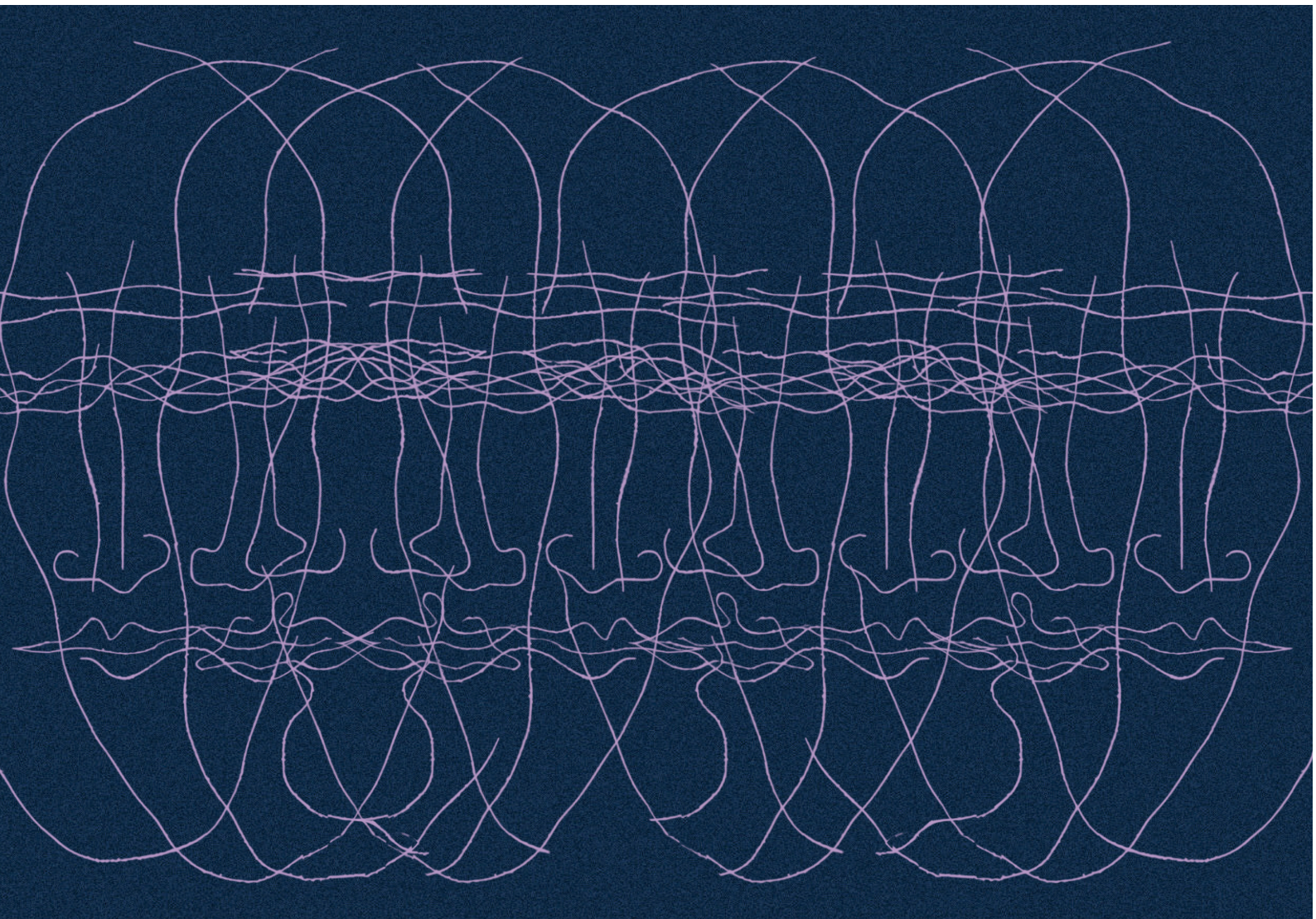
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