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Azerbaijani Women, Online Mediatized Activism and Offline Mass Mobilization

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Abstract: Despite its post-Soviet history, Azerbaijan is an under-investigated country in academic research—compared with the other former constituencies, such as the Baltic countries or Russia, of the USSR—and gender questions of the contemporary Azerbaijani society are even less touched on. Within the current context of the post-“Arab Spring” era of mediatized connectivity and collective political engagement, this article looks into and analyzes how Azerbaijani women participate in different online and offline social and political movements, and if (and how) they are impeded by the increased state authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. Using data, obtained from online information resources, yearly reports of human rights organizations, focus group discussions, and interviews, the study detects four major activist constellations within the Azerbaijani field of gendered politics. Based on the analysis of conditions of detected groups, the article claims that flash mobs, a tactic employed mainly by liberal activists, emerge as the promising way in overcoming the normative nature of Azerbaijani patriarchal society, thus providing an opportunity for normalization and internalization of the feeling of being on the street and acting in concert with others—the practices which might lead towards an increasing participation of (especially young) women in the political processes of the country.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; oppressive politics; political opposition; surveillance; women activists

1. Introduction

The turbulent “Arab Spring”—which took place mainly during the years of 2011 and 2012 and has dramatically changed the political geography of the Middle East—has also inspired other insurgent oppositional movements around the world. The Azerbaijani online opposition of 2011, enthused by the seeming success of revolutions in North Africa, and organized mostly on social networking sites, was not an exception. As the transformation of mostly Muslim geographies was in its heyday, it did not take long for Azerbaijani activists to become impressed by the possibilities brought with online organizational capacities of social media and to start organizing their protests on these platforms.

The response of the Azerbaijani government to these developments was very harsh. Police forces violently dispersed activists at their every attempt, and legislative bans on further dares of conducting any form of oppositional protest “effectively criminalized the protests . . . and led to imprisonment for many of those who organized and took part in them” ([1], p. 70). As the calls to turn Azadlıq Meydanı (Azadlıq Square) into “Baku’s Tahrir”, placed through Facebook posts and Twitter tweets, resulted in arrests of opposition protesters even before the events took place, it became obvious that the state surveillance had “significantly increased its monitoring of internet activity and clamped down on social-media sites, news outlets, and blogs” ([2], p. 68).

We live in an era of mediatization, a meta-process by which everyday communication practices become increasingly dependent on new media technologies. This process, through which activist movements rapidly shift towards organizing themselves on social media platforms, also changes the

shape of surveillance practices. Mediatized surveillance, the conduct of which depends on increase in the use of contemporary media technologies, enables more scrupulous, more individualized types of surveillance to be enacted, as surveillance shifts towards a new level of monitoring, *identity-based surveillance*. This is a type of tracking which enables focusing, if necessary, on the “elder, children, women, unhealthy, homosexual, homeless people, racially different and immigrant populations—in brief, all the ‘others’ of different social, cultural and economic contexts” ([3], p. 120).

However, within the Azerbaijani context, the state does not need to extensively invest in the surveillance of women. Azerbaijani culture, especially when it comes to women and their everyday life behavior, is already saturated with surveillance, since in the patriarchal Azerbaijani society all “male family members are typically charged with monitoring their sisters and female cousins” ([4], p. 6). So, despite the nefarious case of journalist Khadija Ismayilova who was blackmailed with an intimate video, filmed by a camera secretly planted in her bedroom, it remains to be the case that “surveillative apparatuses of Azerbaijan, aiming to monitor and keep under control Internet users’ online media and social networking practices, are currently targeting male activists only, since there are no clear indicators that the women protesters are kept under the close online surveillance as well” ([5], p. 46).

Within such a context, it should not be surprising then that all of Azerbaijani activists—who were targeted, taken into custody, or imprisoned as a direct result of clampdowns and dispersions of the recent protests—were males. This situation inevitably evokes a number of questions about gender dynamics of protests in Azerbaijan: Were (and are) there any women activists, personally engaging with political processes and oppositional protests? How are they affected by the violent policies of the state, resolute about keeping the status quo? How are they organized? How do they recruit new members?

This paper focuses on Azerbaijan, which, despite its post-Soviet history, is an under-researched country—compared with the other former constituencies, such as the Baltic countries or Russia, of the USSR. Gender questions in the contemporary Azerbaijani society are even less investigated in academic research. Considered to be one of the world’s most secular Muslim countries, Azerbaijani women in general and Azerbaijani activist women in particular, and the possible impacts of their political engagement on other countries of the Caucasus and of the MENA region, call for scrutiny in the current context of mediatized connectivity and collective political engagement.

Towards this goal, and following from the above questions, I firstly look into and analyze how Azerbaijani activist women participate in different political and social movements, both online and offline; how they are organized; and if (and how) they are impeded by the increased state violence. Such analysis is required in order to be able to properly look into the conditions of detected activist constellations, and elaborate on the possible way(s) of increasing involvement of women into the political processes of the country—thus complementing the main aim of this article.

In my research I am following a network perspective, a tool frequently used in social movement and collective action studies. It is a powerful approach, which allows certain flexibility to analyze the “diversity, dynamics, and complexity of collective sociopolitical phenomena”, as well as the “more intelligible rendering of the coordination dynamics that underlie all sorts of collective action efforts” ([6], pp. 363–64). This perspective is helpful in mapping out the different actors in Azerbaijani field of gendered politics, and enables one to acquire “an instrument for forecasting the probable behaviors of agents occupying different positions within that distribution” ([7], p. 58).

Such forecasting allows for speculations on the shortcomings and the promises of the various hubs, detected in the activist constellations, thus contributing towards the goals of this article.

2. Typology of Women Activists in Azerbaijan

In order to attend to the research scope specified above, the *Global Digital Activism Data Set*, developed by the Digital Activism Research Project of the University of Washington, was used here as a starting point. I then integrated into this set the information obtained from the detailed yearly reports of *Human Rights Watch*, *Amnesty International*, and *Freedom House*, thus forming a database

detailing all the online and offline protests that took place in Azerbaijan between the years 2003–2015. This main data source was combined with thorough searches I conducted in the online newspaper archives of *Azadlıq Rədiosu*, *Yeni Müsavat*, and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* in Russian, Azerbaijani, and English languages.

These secondary sources were compared against the information obtained from three accounts of electronic correspondence and long-distance open-ended interviews [8], as well as the two cases of face-to-face semi-structured interviews I conducted with activists and journalists from Azerbaijan. One of the interviews was with Khadija Ismayilova herself, who agreed to engage in a session of electronic correspondence through Facebook Messenger on 30 March 2013.

In addition, on 23 July 2015, a focus group with a number of Azerbaijani activists, mostly from the left-wing political organizations and parties, was conducted in Baku. Both of the activists, with whom I initially engaged with, belonged to the leftist side of the political spectrum. They were very helpful during the process of further recruitment of participants, but this snowballing ended up with the dominance of Marxist activists among the interviewees and focus group members.

This bias in ideological inclinations has a negligible effect on this study, since both in interviews and in focus group discussions the main debate revolved around ontological conditions of activist practices in Azerbaijan. Thus, the ideological standpoint of individual activists was not a focal aspect of the data-gathering process, as the focus was placed instead on the general problems of Azerbaijani politics—such as the increased state authoritarianism and the rapid rise of surveillance practices, together with the more particular difficulties, experienced especially by women protesters.

Although the initial plan was to administer the focus group meeting with six people (four men, two women), a few other activists (all men) also joined in the discussion, and at some point the group grew up to ten people. The focus group lasted for (almost) four hours, and a number of additional issues were covered in the debate. At many instances I chose to remain in a passive observer role, since the group's discussions were already revolving around matters which I wished to be open for debate in the focus group. The discussions would have continued even longer, but as the café where the focus group was conducted closed at 22:30, the group also had to be dispersed. For reasons of personal security, names of neither the interviewees nor the focus group members are revealed in this study, and instead aliases are used when referred to—the only exception is Khadija Ismayilova, who is well known in Azerbaijan. For the same reasons I was not allowed to record the discussions, but only to take handwritten notes.

The resulting analysis, conducted using all these information sources, was aimed to generate a categorical map of protests in Azerbaijan and revolved around the questions of what the protest was about; what the gender distribution of protesters looks like; how many people (and of what gender) were taken into the custody or imprisoned; the extent of served jail terms or paid fines, if any; and so on. Based on the generated map, my analysis further focused on how certain social and political movements in general, and individual women activists involved in them in particular, are affected by increasing state authoritarianism in Azerbaijan.

The results are indicative of a situation where women activists, active both in the oppositional scene and Azerbaijani cyberspace, share some similar traits when it comes to online organization of protests or placing calls for collective action. Yet, they also show some structural differentiations which led me to discern four distinctive categories, based on their ties with the offline political structures and institutions; organizational support systems; and ideological inclinations. These four categories can broadly be named as traditional oppositional political activists; religious Islamic activists; feminist activists; and liberal activists. These categories are constructed and constituted in a general sense, and there exist a number of overlaps between them; for example, it is quite possible that many liberal women activists might be holding feminist ideas and values as well.

2.1. Traditional Oppositional Political Activists

Except for the short-lived statehood period of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920), an independent, democratically-oriented, parliamentary state, for the last two centuries Azerbaijan has been part of firstly Tsarist Russia, and later the Soviet Union. Tsarist Russia had no intention of intervening into the inner dynamics of Azerbaijani society, and the traditional Azerbaijani culture continued to thrive during the Russian rule, with women “tending to the needs of family members and to traditional household tasks, with virtually no access to formal education and with relatively little participation in public life” ([9], p. 33).

Towards the end of the 19th century, with the formation of the local, ethnically Azerbaijani, bourgeois business class influenced by the ideas of Russian and European secularism, Azerbaijani women started to enter the country’s “public sphere through wage labor in the oil industry, garment workshops, charity activities, women’s publications, women’s clubs, and broad political groups that promoted women’s literacy, vocational training, legal rights, and improvement in their overall status” ([10], p. 140).

The period of the Soviet Union’s rule further improved the conditions of Azerbaijani women, as through the egalitarian measures introduced by the socialist state, women were able to take broader work roles in the paid labor force and to gain “greater access to formal education and to political participation”—and the USSR “played a much more pronounced role in providing social services and in providing a social safety net for family and community maintenance” ([9], p. 39).

After proclaiming its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan entered a period of the economic, social, and political hardships due to the shattered economy and the skyrocketing inflation in prices of the consumer goods; occupation of the country’s Nagorno-Karabakh region by Armenian armed forces; the mass influx of Azerbaijani internally displaced persons fleeing the war, as well as the bulk emigration of Azerbaijan’s historical ethnic minorities; and occasional military insurrections. This turbulent era came to an abrupt halt when Heydar Aliyev, the leader of the Soviet Azerbaijan between 1969 and 1982, returned to power in October 1993. He immediately sued for ceasefire with Armenia and moved “aggressively to take advantage of Azerbaijan’s oil resources”, while launching a “successful campaign to elevate the country’s place in the world” ([11], p. 81).

After a decade of Heydar Aliyev’s presidency, his son Ilham Aliyev was appointed as the sole candidate of the ruling party for 15 October 2003 presidential elections. Ilham Aliyev’s landslide victory was met with skepticism and raised concerns over the gradual transition of Azerbaijan towards a “sultanistic semiauthoritarianism” [12]. The recent dynamics of contemporary Azerbaijan are marked with the cases of widespread corruption (well-documented, especially in the public service); the growing nepotism and authoritarianism; the suspicions of the vote fraud; and frequent violations of human rights of activists and journalists [1,2].

Although there are few active oppositional left parties such as *Azərbaycan Kommunist Partiyası* (Azerbaijan Communist Party) or *Azərbaycan Sosial-Demokrat Partiyası* (Azerbaijan Social Democratic Party), their impact within political processes is very limited with very low voter turnover. During the past few years, a revival of leftist ideas among young people has become visible and new organizations such as *Azərbaycan Ekososialistləri* (Eco-socialists of Azerbaijan) and *Sol Front* (Left Front) have emerged, yet their members are still counted only in thousands, if not in hundreds. The category of traditional political activists mainly employs women who are active within traditional oppositional political parties of Azerbaijan, mainly nationalistic and conservative parties such as *Müsavat Partiyası* (Equality Party), *Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası* (Azerbaijani Popular Front Party) or *Azərbaycan Demokrat Partiyası* (Azerbaijan Democratic Party).

Azerbaijani women have always been active in political processes, and the historiography of prominent roles undertaken by them within politics goes a long way back. Within this scope, Azerbaijan has always had a vibrant scene when it came to women, their role within politics and their political influences. It would be interesting to note, for example, that the first known woman diplomat of the “East” is considered to be Sara Khatun of the 15th century, who was the mother of Uzun Hassan, the

head of the Aq Qoyunlu state, one of the predecessor states of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan. Yet, the major turning point is the beginning of the 20th century, when, in 1918, the National Council of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic “passed a law concerning elections to the Constituent Assembly that provided for direct elections, proportional representation, and universal suffrage—thereby making Azerbaijan the first Muslim country ever to enfranchise women” ([13], p. 144). Being the first Muslim country to grant equal voting rights to women, Azerbaijan further intensified the equal treatment of women in politics during the Soviet Union era. This legacy continued after Azerbaijani independence as well, and currently Azerbaijani women comprise 16% of the national parliament, having 20 out of the 125 available seats, and one of the most influential opposition leaders, Lala Shevket, the head of *Milli Birlik* (National Unity Movement) and *Azərbaycan Liberal Partiyası* (Azerbaijan Liberal Party) is a woman. Yet, despite obtaining equal voting rights earlier than quite a few European nations, participation of Azerbaijani women in politics is gradually decreasing. It has been argued that the “increased time necessary to perform housework, the division of roles in the family, the loss of social security, and increasing pessimism” within the Azerbaijani society after the dismantling of the USSR are the “main factors for this decline in women’s participation in politics” ([14], p. 117).

OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission prepared a report about 2010 elections in Azerbaijan where they provided vivid description of participation of women in political election processes, saying that

Gender equality is provided for in the Constitution and the 2006 Law on State Guarantees for Women and Men. However, due to a lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, women continue to play a marginal role in political and public life. Although women account for 51.2 percent of the country’s population, in these elections they represented just 13 percent of contestants (98 out of 743). Five electoral blocs and six political parties nominated female candidates. Of 20 women nominated by YAP [Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası, The New Azerbaijan Party, currently in power in Azerbaijan], 19 were registered (17.1 percent of all registered YAP candidates). The majority of female contestants were registered as independent candidates (59 percent of all women candidates) ([15], p. 15).

Although, as already mentioned, women politicians and activists can be seen participating in many of Azerbaijani political parties—and, from time to time can even occupy top positions—their physical visibility in political protests is limited. It can be said that acts of violence against women during political protests, which most of the time are very brutally suppressed by law enforcement agencies and police forces, are kept at minimum, if they do occur at all.

The most exceptional case within this vein however is the death of Faina Kungurova, a member of Azerbaijan Democratic Party, who was found dead in her pretrial detention cell after being arrested with the charges of drug possession and distribution. She was a “visible member of the political opposition, and participated in a number of popular demonstrations protesting the regimes of both İlham Aliyev and his father, Heydar” as the “vocal supporter of Rasul Guliyev, the former head of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, who fled the country in 1997 and now lives in the United States in self-imposed exile” [16]. Her death was described in the official U.S. Department of State’s annual human rights report as

On November 18, Faina Kungurova died at the Ministry of Justice’s Boyuk Shore medical facility. At the time of her death, Kungurova had been hospitalized for approximately one month, following a 10-day hunger strike in pretrial detention. The Justice Ministry conducted an autopsy and determined the official cause of death to be heart failure. Domestic human rights monitors raised concerns about the circumstances surrounding Kungurova’s death; however, the head of an anti-torture nongovernmental organization (NGO) thoroughly investigated the case and reported that he found no signs of foul play in Kungurova’s death. Domestic monitors considered Kungurova’s arrest on charges of narcotics possession to have been politically motivated ([17], p. 1115).

Yet, much more curious details together with more realistic analyses and evaluations of the actual reasons behind her imprisonment were revealed in a secret cable sent from the U.S. Embassy in Baku to the USA on 30 November 2007. This cable, leaked by WikiLeaks and describing the background of events while Kungurova was still alive, openly states that

F. K(h)ungurova has been an activist in the “ADP” party (“Azerbaijan Democratic Party”) since 2001. Her propaganda activities seem to embarrass the current authorities, who are alleged to have asked her to end these activities and to sign a statement asserting that Rasul Guliyev had forced her to take part in demonstrations and to falsify accounts. Given her refusal, she was detained in the women’s prison, then transferred to Gobustan high security prison (the only woman to have been kept there), where she was apparently placed in the “karger” for disciplinary reasons, and finally transferred to the central hospital, where the delegation of the joint working group met her and where she was considered as mentally deranged and was being treated for this. She is currently serving her sentence in the women’s prison [18].

Her death caused a stir amongst the international community and, shortly after the incident, a number of organizations called for the prompt, thorough, and impartial investigation of the matter. According to a *Radio Free Europe* news article about Kungurova’s death, the case of her previous arrest in 2002 “gained Western attention when prison officials forced her to serve her term in all-male prison” and shortly after “being placed on a Council of Europe list of political prisoners, Kungurova was finally released in May 2004” [16]. The same news article also expressed that Jane Buchanan, a researcher in the South Caucasus with Human Rights Watch, called for a full investigation to determine if and to what degree prison authorities are responsible for the death of Kungurova, saying that

Human Rights Watch remains very concerned about the situation in Azerbaijan...with respect to the media, and civil society, and freedom of expression . . . And this most recent case of this death in custody of a female activist should be thoroughly investigated by the authorities. The cause of the death should be determined, and any responsibility that the authorities may have for her death should be investigated, and anyone found responsible should be held accountable [16].

As Khadija Ismayilova also confirmed during our electronic correspondence, the case of Faina Kungurova is the only known Azerbaijani incident of death of a woman activist while in custody of law enforcement. Furthermore, in order not to cause international criticism, the state security bodies are usually known to prefer to take women protesters into the “short-term custody or put into jail for brief, token periods of time, like the five-day prison term of Gozel Bayramova, deputy head of the opposition Azerbaijani Popular Front Party” ([5], p. 46).

2.2. Religious Islamic Activists

Although the majority of its population associates itself in one way or another with Islam, historically Azerbaijan has been a safe haven for various movements challenging traditional normative Islam, such as the Hurufi movement, whose outspoken orator Imadaddin Nasimi is still considered to be one of the most important and influential Azerbaijani national poets. The richness of diverse religious traditions is also apparent in the country’s history, as the “present-day territory of Azerbaijan has been inhabited by Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Caucasian Albanian Christians, Russian Orthodox Christians, Molokans, (European) Jews and ‘Mountain Jews’, among others” ([19], p. 6). Thus, it is significant that the collapse of the Soviet Union, in conjunction with various other developments, marked the start of a change in the social imaginary of Azerbaijani people: a revival of religious activities in everyday life. As Sofie Bedford describes the ongoing transformations,

Azerbaijan, like other former Soviet republics, experienced something of a religious “boom” after independence, as religion re-emerged in public life. The 17 mosques that had existed in Soviet times suddenly mushroomed into thousands, other places of worship were restored, many religious organizations registered and the opportunity to study religion in the country as well as to travel to religious universities abroad was made possible ([20], p. 194).

Needless to say, such a rapid increase in the rate of religious activities and how they affect everyday life raises many questions, such as the experiential and political implications of religiosity. One immediate conflict which started in this sense was related with veiling and hijab, traditional conservative Muslim garments, which a number of Azerbaijani women started to adopt because of the peer pressure to “find solace and support among fellow-believers, or simply due to ideological conviction” ([21], p. 373). As a result of ministerial decree, since 2011 hijab has been a banned dress code in all Azerbaijani public schools and institutions of higher education. Although government strongly maintains that “women and female youth are free to wear the hijab in *non*-school settings” ([22], p. 95), this ban causes protests—demanding a change of law to allow women to wear hijab in schools as well—to occur from time to time.

Curiously enough, these protests are joined by almost no women, and it is most of the time only men demanding the right for freedom of hijab. This does not mean that religious women are not active in organizing protests and participating, albeit limitedly, in politics. Women’s participation is being conducted mainly through online communication channels, and Facebook is one of the main platforms for debate. Through Facebook groups such as *İslam Dininin Mərtəbələri* (Pillars of Islamic Religion) [23] and *Müsləmanıq* (We Are Muslims) [24], Islamic activist women engage in discussions of different matters; share (almost exclusively) religious stories, photos and videos; as well as place calls for protests and acts of resistance.

2.3. Feminist Activists

Nayerreh Tohidi, one of the leading experts on gender issues in Azerbaijan, emphasizes that Azerbaijani women, “especially in comparison to women of other Muslim societies, have achieved an impressive level of emancipation, particularly in the realms of education, employment, primary health, and legal rights pertaining to matters of family and personal status”, and yet, at the same time, this “emancipation and liberation remain shot through with dilemmas, contradictions, and duality” ([25], p. 111). She further describes the situation of Azerbaijani women as

Despite many flaws and problems in the Soviet experiment with socialism and with the “woman question,” Soviet women, including Muslim women of the Soviet East in general, and Azerbaijani women in particular, had accomplished an undeniable level of legal emancipation by the late 1980s. The emancipatory aspects of the Azeri women’s situation are more evident in comparison with their pre-Soviet situation and with the status of women in other Muslim countries, including neighboring Iran and Turkey ([26], p. 150).

Ulviya T. Mikailova, while talking about the history of feminist movements in Azerbaijan, paints a gloomier picture related to the role of women within political and economic processes of the country, especially in relation to decision-making centers and the general emancipation of women within the social structure of everyday life by emphasizing that

Through granting important but not key posts to women in the party and Soviet administrative bodies, the illusion of women’s participation in the political life of the country was created. This illusion was dispelled quickly after the collapse of the Soviet system. In the beginning of 1991, women made up about 40% of the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan Republic: in 1992 they were only 6%. After the last elections (1995) the ratio was 12%, which testifies to the positive dynamics of the present situation and raises hopes for future gender equality...Intensive development of the legislative basis of

women's equality on the one hand, and their subordinate position in real life on the other, creates a false impression of their well-being. At the same time the masculinisation of the decision making level has strengthened. Thus the political sphere is deprived of women's contribution to decisions taken at the policy making level [27].

Thus, based on such analyses, another category—pertaining to activists who are interested in gender-related issues within Azerbaijan—can be conceived here. These activists are mostly from white-collar professions and include academics, political scientists, sociologists, and lawyers.

Organizations of various types can be distinguished within this sphere. Although most of them “usually claim political independence, a number of them are directly or indirectly active in partisan politics as well as women's rights issues” ([28], p. 37). One of the main associations women are loosely organized around is *Azərbaycan Qender İnformasiya Mərkəzi* (Azerbaijan Gender Information Center, AGIC). According to the description of AGIC available on its website [29], AGIC is the first informational and analytical, bibliographical and documental center of the women's movement on the territory of the South Caucasus, founded in the beginning of 2002 under the support of George Soros' Open Society Institute's Azerbaijan branch. The project to establish the center and activities related with gender issues in Azerbaijan was carried out by the coalition of a number of women's organizations, such as the Mingechaur Women Youth Center “Shams”, Research Center of Modern Social Processes, Azerbaijan Association of Organizational and Technical Development, Association of Creative Women, and Hudat Center of Youth Programmes Development. AGIC enjoys its close collaboration and cooperation with the Azerbaijani government, especially through a number of administrative and bureaucratic bodies involved with gender-related issues within the country; and also benefits from the support of its global partners such as the World Bank and the USAID-funded Eurasia Foundation.

Less academic versions of feminist organizations active within Azerbaijan exist as well. The most prominent of them perhaps is *YUVA Humanitar Mərkəzi* (YUVA Humanitarian Center), which is a nongovernmental and nonprofit organization based in Baku. They have their own website [30], where it is stated that since 1997 their aim has been to contribute to the self-realization of women, children, and youth in building a civil society in Azerbaijan.

YUVA works as a project-based organization, with the focus on educational activities in the field of human rights, gender equality, civil society development, conflict resolution, peace-building, and intercultural learning. Since 2006, they have been running a long-term project named *Gənc Qadın İnkişaf Mərkəzi* (Young Women Development Center), which is structured as a space for meeting, working and learning of young Azerbaijani women.

YUVA center established *Azərbaycan Feminist Qrupu* (Azerbaijan Feminist Group) at almost the same time as it itself was created—the first and the only feminist group from Azerbaijan to be included in WomenAid International's (London-based humanitarian aid and development agency) CaucasusNow directory. By underlining that they take notice of the unequal position of women and men in society and want to change that situation, Azerbaijan Feminist Group describes as its main mission to introduce feminist concepts and debates to women in Azerbaijan and to empower and inspire young women and girls to create positive change in their lives and communities. The group also states that they want to advance young women and girls' equality, nonviolence, development, and, most importantly, empowerment of women in all sectors of society. For these purposes they published *Femina*, the first feminist monthly digest in Azerbaijan, addressing issues of feminism in the country and around the world, with the main ambition of familiarizing Azerbaijani women with feminist ideas, debates and movements in other countries, as well as providing access to information published by similar groups. Azerbaijan Feminist Group states that of special concern to them is the debate over equality under the law and access to equal opportunities in practice for Azerbaijani women; as well as achieving better educational opportunities for women, encouraging women to vote and to participate in the democratic development of Azerbaijani society, and supporting vulnerable women groups in society, including refugee women, pensioners, and single mothers.

During the Eurovision Song Contest 2012, which was held in Baku, singer Loreen, the Swedish representative of the contest (and the winner of 2012) visited the women's center of Azerbaijan Feminist Group and talked with them about a number of issues, emphasizing that "old habits may die hard, but change is possible" ([31], p. 18). Thus, as Tohidi notes:

Women's social activism, initially dominated by charity and promotion of nationalism, is gradually gaining gender-consciousness. Azerbaijani women currently avoid identifying themselves with feminism, especially "Western feminism", which is associated in their minds with hostility to men and the family. But many aspects of their social activism would serve a long-term feminist strategy. Activities indicative of a growing gender-sensitivity in women's civic activism in Azerbaijan include women's fights against unemployment and poverty, and more recently against domestic violence, sex discrimination, regressive attempts to reverse egalitarian family law, and trafficking in women, as well as their support for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and support for promotion of women's representation in the parliament and political parties ([28], p. 39).

So far, as far as I was able to find in my research, there is no documented evidence of violence against feminist protesters in Azerbaijan. Most of the issues raised by feminist groups are already (claimed to be) on the high priority list of the government, mainly due to the direct and personal involvement of President Ilham Aliyev's wife, sister, and two daughters in the issue. For example, another quite prominent organization related with gender issues in Azerbaijan is *Qadınlar Məclisi "Sevil"* (Azerbaijan Women's Majlis: Sevil), which claims to be the largest women's association in the country, with chapters and representatives in 72 regions of Azerbaijan, and is led by the President's sister Sevil Aliyeva ([28], p. 37).

2.4. Liberal Activists

In November 2012, within the framework of a project focusing on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, a roundtable on the theme of "Azerbaijan and gender-based violence against women" was held in Baku. After a series of long discussions focusing on statistics, causes, and possible solutions on the issue, the event ended with a flash mob with the name *Bloody Axes*, in which young people with bloody axes figuratively struck young girls, thus trying to draw public attention to the problem of violence against women [32].

Although the term itself remains contested, flash mobs are commonly defined as sudden "happenings in public spaces in which several or more people, often summoned through social media, gathered to perform seemingly spontaneous actions lasting typically only a few minutes, and then dispersed as quickly as they had gathered" ([33], p. 105).

They comprise of a very specific category of highly praised "smart mobs"—a term coined by Howard Rheingold to describe groups of people that are "able to act in concert even if they don't know each other", and are "cooperating in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities" ([34], p. xii).

Even if flash mobs are frequently equated with practices of counter-culture movements, like the eventful happenings of the Situationist International of 1960s or the acid house raves of 1980s, they have a different nature. Unlike similar events, which most of the time take place in "spaces hidden from the public gaze", flash mob has a "strong spectacular dimension and explicitly aims to capture public attention" ([35], p. 126).

In any given case, a flash mob differentiates itself through a number of generic features which include an "actual or apparent spontaneity in which participants assemble suddenly and randomly; a performance of some kind; an element of surprise for onlookers for whom the performance is unexpected; a generally short duration of approximately ten minutes or less; and a point or reason for organizing the flash mob" ([33], p. 105).

The ability of flash mobs to involve full spontaneity and unexpectedness is fueled by the fact that they are most of the time conducted by technologically-savvy, highly educated young people who are able to “coordinate actions with others around the world—and, perhaps more importantly, with people nearby”, and who, due to their high skills of mobile and computer technology usage, are gaining “new forms of social power, new ways to organize their interactions and exchanges just in time and just in place” ([34], pp. xii–xiii).

Flash mob participants, namely liberal activists, constitute in this paper the last category of women activists in Azerbaijan engaging with political processes. Young women who are part of *Flashmob Azerbaijan* are most of the time liberally or critically oriented; highly educated; compliant with Western values; and usually of upper-middle class origins. Being liberal and highly educated from middle classes, these are most of the time the same young women, who, as Farideh Heyat argues, will enjoy empowerment, and not only in the economic sense, due to “their education and knowledge of western languages, and their rising contact with western norms and values”, which inevitably will result in “increased autonomy and greater confidence” ([36], p. 403).

Even if the group’s Facebook page has only 21,131 likes [37], their official YouTube channel [38] has 53 videos, of which the most successful one is the *Madagascar* flash mob, which was viewed by 1,835,204 people [39]. Considering that the total population of Azerbaijan is around 9 million, this is a remarkable number of views.

Liberal activists are also the only category of Azerbaijani women activists, with the exception of (very rare) feminist protests, where the actual number of participating women at various instances significantly surpasses the number of men taking part in the events, as can clearly be seen in Figure 1, provided below.



Figure 1. A scene from *Sexy Gangnam Style* flash mob [40].

Although there is no documented evidence of police intervening into or dispersing Azerbaijani flash mobs, there is one curious incident, which deserves attention here.

Ilkin Rustamzade, a member of the Free Youth Organization, was tried in 2013 and convicted to eight years in prison with the charge of “‘hooliganism’ for allegedly filming and uploading a version

of the global internet meme ‘Harlem Shake’ to YouTube” ([41], p. 90). Although the video, as all the other examples of the passing “Harlem Shake” craze, is apolitical, and only depicts “several young men performing a comedy sketch, several seconds of it sexually suggestive, accompanied by a short excerpt from the song ‘Harlem Shake’” ([42], p. 24), Rustamzade’s Facebook posts and electronic correspondences were provided in the court as the evidence of his Facebook use to “assist the N!DA activists in organizing the March 10, 2013 protests” ([41], p. 90).

This is a very interesting incident in the sense of showing how policies of shaming operate in Azerbaijan. Although it is a strategy mainly oriented towards women and their social roles, the same mechanism was used in this case as well: a known dissident was taken into police custody with the claims of shooting an amoral video, a pretext for defamation campaign, and only later on was pressed with the real charges of assisting other activists in their protest-organizing efforts.

3. Discussion

Out of the four activist categories that were conceptualized based on my analysis, only the members of the liberal activist group have managed to have (most of the time) more women than men as participants of their flash mobs. Compared with other women groups, liberal activists of flash mobs employ another unique feature as well. Whereas traditional political opposition is purely a physical phenomenon (since activists are most of the time visible and functional only within physical spaces, such as the political party headquarters and their local branches, or the streets and squares during the protests), feminist and religious Islamic activists function in a mediatized form mainly on the Internet. Liberal activists are simultaneously present in both of these realms, since a flash mob essentially is a “phenomenon characterized by the momentary disruption of the physical environment by a virtual community” ([43], p. 11).

The inclusive nature of flash mobs is also different from the issue oriented politics of feminist and religious women movements, or conservative discourses run by the political opposition parties. Actually, the discourses of Azerbaijani opposition, with exception of left-wing parties, are not so different from oppositions in other semi-authoritarian countries, and are “teeming with nationalism and xenophobia, sometimes so poisonous that official government policy looks cosmopolitan in comparison” ([44], p. 86).

In this sense, flash mobs provide a unique opportunity for inclusion of (more) women into collective action. This is even more important in a country like Azerbaijan, a traditional patriarchal society, where women are constantly being surveilled, and especially young women have a difficult time when trying to engage in Internet activities due to “society’s strict behavioral codes” ([4], p. 12). Although for many years various women’s associations, groups, non-governmental organizations and political parties tried to “raise women’s consciousness and seek to alter traditional, gendered social relations and consequently to give Azeri women more power and control over their own well-being” ([45], p. 303), these efforts fall short of enabling greater numbers of Azerbaijani women to participate in politics. It is probably because of this that Arzu, a feminist leftist woman in her early 20s, and one of the participants of the focus group, remarks that

There should be more women within the political movements. Unfortunately, we were not able to integrate more girls into the struggle [46].

As was already indicated, liberal participants of flash mobs are the only category of Azerbaijani women activists, with the exception of rare feminist protests, who are able to involve more women than men in their events. This fact requires a closer look at flash mobs and their promises in relation to novel forms of political collective action and gendered mass mobilization in Azerbaijani politics.

3.1. Flash Mobs

Initially, flash mobs were embraced by the mainstream media, which are always on the look for sensational events in order to pump up their circulation numbers and popularity. This kind of publicity

included a wide coverage of flash mobs starting from their first gathering, which “occurred in June 2003, organised (according to his own testimony) by Bill Wasik . . . senior editor of the American upmarket fashion magazine *Harper’s*” ([35], p. 125). This initially optimistic depiction of flash mobs was severely damaged during the London riots of summer 2011, when the mainstream media, “groping for what to call these events”, decided to christen them as flash mobs—“lumped them in, that is, with the fad in which large crowds carry out a public performance and then post the results on YouTube” [47].

This incident clearly shows that the earlier understanding of flash mob to be a leaderless, apolitical and entertainment-only-oriented happening quickly faded away, leaving its place to a more politicized description—that flash mob has an intrinsic potential for immense political action and protest, as deeply embedded within its formation. As Judith A. Nicholson further emphasizes

Efforts to define flash mobbing as leaderless and apolitical seemed at odds with the obvious fact that the trend was closely guided from its beginnings. This is not a criticism of flash mobbing proponents, their hopes for the trend, or the pleasure that flash mobbers found through participation. I simply want to suggest that in naming flash mobbing and trying to construct its genealogy, historical narratives of the mob and its complementary propensity toward democracy and tyranny were evoked though such narratives were not made explicit [48].

In this sense, although they are not political protests in and of themselves and are most often conducted simply for the reasons of entertainment and fun, flash mob activities are potential sites for political activism due to their unpredictability and immediacy; their capacity for rapidly mediated mass mobilization; their connectedness with urban space; and their overall nature of being a form of collective action. Flash mobs bear within themselves a latent potential of disruptive power, since even when their content is completely “playful and harmless, the spontaneous mass gathering is by its nature threatening to the state apparatus” ([43], p. 14). They also are beneficial in assisting to reconsider urban doxa, as they “encourage onlookers and participants to question the rigidity of laws and norms that govern street behaviour” ([49], p. 227).

Although some commentators treat flash mobs as the “symptom of the collapse of belief in the critical public sphere” and take them as an “example of the depoliticizing effects of the participatory complex” ([50], p. 191), evolution of the phenomenon in Azerbaijan challenges pessimistic accounts and provides a good counter-example against the cynical interpretation of flash mobs.

3.2. Flash Mobs in Azerbaijan

As everywhere else, Azerbaijani political activists initially met flash mobs with noninterest, almost apathy. This rapidly changed as activists started to realize the possibilities brought in through the “political effects of new network formations emergent within the crowd” ([51], p. 39). One of the very first flash mobs in Azerbaijan took place in 2009 when “small groups of young people dressed in black appeared in the streets of Baku”, some of them walking with red carnations in their hands, some whistling, and some of them turning their backs to the “stage during the Flower Day evening concert” ([52], p. 3).

After that, flash mobs started to be used (quite) frequently by liberal youth groups for the purposes of oppositional activism, as for example in 2012 *N!DA Vətəndaş Hərəkəti* (N!DA Citizen Movement) conducted a flash mob to protest urban renewal projects, which were implemented for building infrastructure for the hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest and left thousands of people homeless as a general result [53]. Engaging in the manner of a Bakhtinian carnival, which essentially celebrates a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” and actually marks the “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” ([54], p. 10), activists displayed two locks with the words “Show Business” and “Human Rights” engraved on them, underscoring that the issue of human rights remains under locks despite the Eurovision Song Contest being held in Baku.

3.3. From Flash Mob Formations to Rhizomated Subactivism

Maria Bakardjieva's concept of subactivism, that is the "small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference . . . and remain submerged in everyday life" ([55], p. 134) can be very helpful in understanding the possible implications of flash mobs within the spectrum of political activism. According to Bakardjieva's definition, subactivism is an "important dimension of democracy grounded in individuals' paramount reality"—but this small dimension will "remain closed off and largely inconsequential to the affairs of the polis, if no proper bridges are built between it and the subpolitical and strictly political strata populated by collectives, organizations and institutions" ([56], p. 103). Flash mobs can be helpful in overcoming this distance between disparate individuals and groups and build the necessary bridges for their interactions, discussions and actions, thus leading toward the formation of *rhizomated subactivism*—a culmination moment of revitalized collaborations between different political organizations, social movements, mediatized activists, and subactivist individuals.

As flash mob is defined to have a dualistic nature, to be an "instance in which the potential of virtuality becomes realized" ([43], p. 11), the concept of rhizomated subactivism and of flash mob resonate well with each other through the emphasis put by both on simultaneous mediatized activism and physical presence. Flash mobs are said to "emerge and evanesce like visitations from the supernatural", since they heavily capitalize on the "fear of more insidious outbreaks: of insanity, violence, or virus" ([57], p. 14). Thus they bear within themselves a potential for challenging the status quo, especially if the rapid mobilization of their participants can be effectively channeled to build a nascent movement. Additionally, for example, they were already put to use as creative ways of resisting hypersurveillance [49].

One of the effective ways for flash mobs to evolve into a rhizomated subactivism is through their usage of humor as one of the main components of their happenings. Humor has already proven to be a very powerful and effective tool in building global nonviolent resistance movements. It was used for the purposes of recruitment of new members. Humor attracted attention from people who were not politically involved, and by making activist participation to seem cool and fun, helped in facilitating a "culture of dissent by building solidarity" ([58], p. 73).

Humor can also be very influential in "creating a culture of resistance where members support each other and overcome political and individual apathy" ([59], p. 176).

Also, within the Azerbaijani context, where the state "has not completely deterred citizens from using social media", but has significantly "changed the attitudes of frequent Internet users toward dissent" ([60], p. 284), humor can help to re-facilitate mediatized activism, thus overcoming the fear related with the usage of social networking platforms.

One of the most debated issues in the focus group discussions was related with the sense of fear, dominant among the general population of Azerbaijan, and especially widespread among the younger strata of society. Young people, otherwise dissatisfied with the social developments in the country, are afraid to join political meetings; to participate in any form of demonstration; or even to express their opinions through online commenting. However, this feeling of overwhelmed fear is understandable within the current zeitgeist of Azerbaijan, where not only the dissenters, but their family members and close relatives as well, are targeted and severely punished. The case of Emin Milli, an activist blogger who uploaded a video humorously featuring a donkey delivering a fake press briefing to YouTube [61], is especially teaching here. Not only was he jailed a week after the uploading of the video, but his "wife's father had been fired from his government job because of Mr. Milli's political activities" and his "wife, her own future in turmoil, had asked for a divorce" [62].

As humor has always been seen as an "important factor for reducing people's fear of the regime and of the police" ([59], p. 180), it is of no coincidence that the satirical Facebook group *HamamTimes* [63], currently liked by 314,838 people, gets most of its comments after posting videos and pictures critical of the daily realities of modern Azerbaijan.

So, in the period of increasing Azerbaijani networked authoritarianism [60] people use humor to latently express their dissatisfaction; to subtly show their discontent; and to clandestinely declare their criticism.

4. Conclusions

This article focused on Azerbaijan, a particularly under-researched country in academic studies, and aimed to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of mediatized activism and gendered politics in the Azerbaijani context. Following the main aim of the article, I firstly looked into and analyzed how Azerbaijani activist women participate in different political and social movements, both online and offline; how they are organized; and if (and how) they are impeded by the increased state authoritarianism. The conducted analysis shows that, among the four activist constellations detected in the study, the only two categories where women have never been subjected to physical (as in traditional oppositional women) or symbolical (as in religious Islamic women) state violence are feminist and liberal activist groups.

Further analysis of the conditions of detected gendered activist groups shows that unlike the (almost exclusively) Internet-based presence and the issue-oriented political framework of feminist activists, liberal activist participants of flash mobs provide a unique way of combining a mediatized form of activism and virtual community building with the physical presence in public spaces and concerted collective action. As flash mobs can be viewed as a representative of a power wave, which is gradually building itself using a bottom-up approach, they emerge as a promising process which might lead towards an increased participation of (especially young) women in the political processes of the country. In this way, flash mobs also resonate with the concept of rhizomated subactivism, which emphasizes that mediatized activism is not enough by itself, and street-based political action has to be put back into existence for thorough democratic development.

State authorities, police forces, law enforcement agencies, and middle-class Azerbaijani families view flash mobs as harmless and entertaining acts of fun-seeking apolitical youth, as an amalgam of online humor expression and offline urban space participation. The perception of flash mobs to be apolitical, as well as the lack of persuading evidence suggesting that Internet activities of women are surveilled as intensively as of those of men [5], provide a unique opportunity to develop a strong cooperation between the realms of the online and the offline. This alliance of physical and virtual spaces will definitely help in involving more women into processes of decision making and electoral voting, as well as in practices of political participation—a *sine non qua* of any properly functioning democracy.

Flash mobs can specifically be influential in overcoming the normative nature of patriarchal society—where male relatives and peers are encouraged to watch over women—which is evident in the cases where number of women participants surpasses number of male ones. Thus, flash mobs contribute to the evolution of empowering politics, and provide an opportunity for normalization and internalization of the feeling of being on the street; of acting in concert with others; and of being part of the crowd—which essentially is what political mass mobilizations and collective actions were always about.

Further, as the case of the flash mob named *Bloody Axes*—a collaboration of liberal and feminist activists—also clearly shows, flash mobs can be used to challenge the classical gender dynamics by supporting feminist political action; and at the same time transforming traditional political parties towards more gender-sensitive positions. This shift can already be detected in the leftist spectrum of Azerbaijani politics, as for example in the case of *MGM: Mətbuatın Gender Monitoringi*. Established by a group of leftist feminist women, MGM is an online initiative for gender monitoring of Azerbaijani media [64], and archives the cases of sexist and homophobic rhetoric; the gender stereotyping; and the misrepresentation of women in Azerbaijani print, online, and social media.

These small shifts and changes will eventually contribute to the transformation of the society on the whole, as true social change starts within the processes and structures of everyday life—within

(mostly) banal and mundane realms, and through (at times) unexceptional and ordinary activities of common people.

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