

# TRANSFORMING THE GENDER REGIME: AN ETHNOSOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MODERNIZATION IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS.

## *Summary*

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This article offers an empirical analysis of power and gender relations in the traditional Dagestani family. It also describes and explains the dynamics of change in these relations, and the reasons for their reproduction today. The paper is built around a case study that uncovers the mechanisms of everyday life in a traditional Dagestani village. In particular I was interested in studying positions of power occupied by women in the household, as well as the transformation of women's status and role in the family and the village community in times of economic difficulty. The status of women within the household is linked to the family's place in larger society, and, as a consequence, the marketization of social relations places considerable pressure on the household economy and on the traditional rules that regulate and legitimize the accepted power hierarchy within the family.

The paper is based on fieldwork undertaken in a small rural community in Dagestan, located in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus Mountains at an altitude of 1,100 meters. At the start of my work, in 2006, the village had a population of 739, living in 120 homesteads with small adjoining household plots. Residents' livelihood is based primarily on household activities. Other work is mostly in the public sector, namely at the school and in the village administration. In addition, there are a few jobs in trade and services. Overall, no more than 40 jobs in this community are available through the non-household job market. In order to cater to their households' increasing needs, men are forced to look for work outside the village.

The community continues to be structured by traditional patriarchal relations: young people are expected to defer to elders, and women to men; duties are rigidly distributed according to age and sex. Parents continue to play an important role in the choice of their children's marriage partners. Large, multi-generation families governed by unquestioned paternal authority are widespread. In other words, this is a classic example of a patriarchal community. In addition, the seclusion and small scale of this village make institutional change a drawn-out process.

The paper discusses data from fieldwork undertaken in four stages, from 2006 to 2009. In 2006, my main focus was on the study of everyday interaction and the community's social organization through participant observation, informal

conversation, and in-depth interviews with local residents. In 2007, I paid particular attention to the everyday life of women. I focused on ten women whose accounts of their own lives I had found most interesting during my previous stay. The women simultaneously criticized and justified traditions based on patriarchal attitudes. The tradition found most conflict-prone was the practice of submitting to elders. In order to uncover the workings of patriarchal power relations, I then, in 2008, selected the most typical multi-generational family and interviewed every female member of the household. In 2009, I double-checked some of the information previously collected and asked specific questions to gain a more complete understanding of how women's status and role in the family and society were being transformed.

Trying to understand the mechanism by which stable patriarchal relations are reproduced within the family, I identified the most significant habitual gender codes that define women's lives. Analyzing the narratives of women belonging to three generations, I also tried to trace the changes that have occurred in the organization of everyday life, family relations, and gender roles. The first part of the article describes the distinct gender regimes associated with three different historical periods: traditional, Soviet, and post-Soviet. I then go on to describe how these regimes have structured the biographies of three women belonging to different generations of the same family.

The gender regime of traditional Dagestani culture rigidly defines male and female roles as well as gender relations. The social organization of the community virtually segregates the two sexes. The distance between men and women is vast: husband and wife are not allowed to address each other by name; there are special male and female meeting places in the village, and household duties are assigned by sex.

As I have been able to observe, however, women have relatively wide powers within the household. In traditional Dagestani society, women, when reaching a certain age, are given the right to manage the household, assign tasks to helpers, and impose their will in cases of disagreement within the family. The household economy serves not only as the locus of production, but also as the space where both women and men lead fulfilled lives. Their social role as mothers raises women's status with age, allowing them eventually to command respect and deference not only within the family, but also among other members of the community. Motherhood is seen as a cultural good that is of great significance and value to the community.

Thus the status of women in traditional Dagestani society is complex. On the one hand, mothers are more respected the older they get and the more children they have. On the other hand, women are expected to be modest, obedient, and submissive. These rules ensure the reproduction of a hierarchy dominated by men.

Kinship relations based on large extended families are the main mechanism for the control of behavior and the reproduction of patriarchal culture. A kinship group whose members follow the traditional rules is viewed as respectable. It is the kinship group that helps and protects its members in times of need.

In traditional Dagestani culture, power is the end result of a long life, a consequence of social respect for old age granted in exchange for respectable behavior. The custom was for the young generation to honor their elders, thereby

ensuring similar recognition—and hence power—in their own old age. Patriarchy is justified not only with reference to its contribution to social stability, but also as ensuring generational continuity.

The Soviet period contributed to a rethinking of traditions and to the emergence of new practices. Implementing its ideology of creating a unique society, the Soviet state took a number of steps to standardize behavior and lifestyles across the country, regardless of local traditions and customs. Regarding the Caucasus, one of its main objectives was to eradicate Islam, *adat* common law, and ethnic culture. However, policies in this regard were inconsistent. At some moments, the Soviet authorities were forced to uphold customary principles. Sovietization proceeded not so much through a replacement of traditional ways of life, but through synthesis with them. The Soviet period not so much destroyed the traditional way of life in this community as it created the foundations for the current processes of transformation.

Educational and cultural measures were a particularly significant means of social transformation, including the creation of a written language, Russian-language instruction, literacy promotion, mandatory secondary education, and the creation of cultural and educational institutions. All this eventually led to a considerable expansion of rural dwellers' horizons. However, they were very slow to take up the new opportunities offered. Only men could make full use of them. They enjoyed higher levels of education, mastered new professions, left the village to work elsewhere, and made their homes in new places. Women either followed their husbands to other regions of the Soviet Union, or remained in the village if their husbands did not leave. Women's life paths continued to be determined by their parents until marriage, and by the husband and his family thereafter. The traditional idea of the respectable family remained largely intact during this period. In other words, the Soviet period was one of unrealized opportunities for Dagestani women.

Russia's transition to a market system brought new lifestyles to the village. The reforms considerably changed the traditional way of life, making residents engage in consumption and seek prosperity. The household is no longer the main place of production, becoming instead a sphere where services are consumed. Increased consumption requires high incomes. Moreover, a decent education, medical help, and other social services are now virtually impossible to obtain without making large, and often informal, payments. This makes monetary income more important, while the household increasingly plays a subordinate role.

The new values of success (promoted among other channels through representations of successful people in the media), coupled with a general recognition of the unprofitability of household work, leads to a significant decrease in the significance of female labor. As a result, the status of women as mothers and housewives diminishes. Household labor loses its prestige and social recognition while remaining female. The new values of success, based on individualism, professional achievement, prosperity, and freedom of choice, favor male labor and reinforce men's position in society. Just as traditional family values are being replaced with emotions, the domestic is being dislodged by the public.

In the community I studied, women have far fewer opportunities and resources than men to achieve professional success as hired workers. Given the gradual but steady decline of the female-dominated household economy, women are becoming even more dependent on men.

These transformations in the community's social structure and gender regime call into question traditional power relations (submission to elders and men). This gradual rethinking of the traditional way of life may be illustrated by the life stories of four women belonging to three generations of a Dagestani family: Naziya, the oldest woman in the family; her daughter-in-law, Zafira; and Zafira's daughters-in-law Samaakh and Dzhamilya (all names have been changed, ages as of 2006).

Naziya, 76, has strictly adhered to the community's conventional rules. Adhering to the norms allowed her to consolidate her status and, in her old age, lay claim to unfettered power within the family and respect in the community. These rewards reconciled her to the injustice she experienced as a woman and justified in her eyes the traditional way of life, which gave elders direct control over younger people's behavior. Aged 80, Naziya continues to take care of the family, shoulder responsibility for it vis-à-vis her fellow villagers, and relay family values. All this buttresses her status and gives her a claim to the power that she is convinced she deserves to wield.

Zafira, 55, also acknowledges the injustice of tradition and the resentment and doubts generated by the system of unquestioned obedience to elders. She finds it vital to maintain her family's and her own status in the community, but unlike Naziya she is not prepared to wait for old age in order to be compensated for her labor and the humility she displayed in her youth. Zafira has begun to use tradition more flexibly. Reconsidering her life experience, she adopts new practices in her relations with other family members. She continues to expect traditional subordination from her own children, but employs more flexible models, based on mutual assistance, in her relations with her daughters-in-law, who perpetuate the kinship group.

In turn, her daughters-in-law Samaakh and Dzhamilya, both 22, stray even further from traditional norms. They perceive the weakening of the tradition of subordination as an opportunity to pursue their own interests. Naziya, who associates her interest exclusively with that of the kinship group, and Suriyat, who places the interests of that group (care for the elderly and for children) above her own, Samaakh and Dzhamilya have little concern for maintaining the kinship group's respectability in the eyes of the village community. They are interested in appearing successful in the eyes of their fellow community members, but the principles of success they espouse are radically novel. They flexibly use elements of tradition in order to achieve the prosperity they aim for.

The past decade has seen a gradual weakening of the previously strong social ties within the village community, yet the need for family support remains. The former tendency results from the growth of individualism, while the latter derives from the continued reproduction of the patriarchal system. The need for solidarity has decreased, yet traditional norms partly continue to regulate life. Through conflicts with the younger generations, older community members uphold the

traditional culture they guard and embody. However, the advent of the market has changed the conditions of their lives and makes their experience ill adapted to the new market reality. As a result, the traditional household economy, based on cooperation between family members, is transformed into a zone of rivalry, conflict, and power competition, while women in the community still lack the resources required to achieve professional success outside the home.

*Authorized translation from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch*