international alert

RESEARCH REPORT

Disinformation and division:
Assessing gender norms in Armenia, Georgia and Poland

In partnership with:

ARTEMIS ALLIANCE

Contents

Abbreviations

AA	Artemis Alliance
CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interviewing
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRRC	Caucasus Research Resource Center
CSO	Civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
GD	Georgian Dream
GID	Gender and identity disinformation
GOC	Georgian Orthodox Church
IVF	In vitro fertilisation
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
LGBT+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and other gender identities
MP	Member of parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RPA	Republican Party of Armenia
SOGIESC	Sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health rights
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WEF	World Economic Forum

Key terminology

Anti-gender movement refers to a transnational, conservative backlash against feminism, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender identities (LGBT+) rights, and progressive understandings of gender and sexuality. It is often driven by religious, right-wing and nationalist groups who frame gender studies, sexual rights and gender equality as threats to traditional family values, national identity and religious morality. The movement is not merely opposed to gender equality but a broader ideological and political strategy against 'gender ideology' or 'genderism'. The movement represents an attack on democracy, human rights, and progressive social change.

Gender is understood as the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity. Gender can also be understood as a system of power relations that structures society, shaping access to resources, opportunities, and social status. As such, gender is a power structure that distributes privilege and oppression among individuals in a particular group.

Gender and identity disinformation (GID) refers to the dissemination of deliberately false information targeting individuals based on gender, gender identity or sexual orientation for political gain. GID aims to discredit and silence women and gender-diverse and LGBT+ individuals across all sectors of society, including high-profile politicians, activists and journalists. It exploits social norms about gender and sexuality to exacerbate societal divisions, polarise populations and spread fear, targeting people who are already vulnerable to various forms of violence and abuse. In effect, it undermines targets' civic participation, threatens individual rights and weakens democratic processes and social cohesion.

Gender norms are socially constructed expectations and rules about how individuals should behave, dress, and interact based on their perceived gender. These norms define what is considered 'masculine' or 'feminine' within a specific culture and historical context. Gender norms influence everything from appearance and behaviour to career choices, family roles and power dynamics in society. They are not natural or fixed, but are reinforced through socialisation, institutions and cultural practices. They are therefore susceptible to change.

Gender stereotypes are oversimplified and generalised beliefs about the characteristics, abilities, roles and behaviours of people. These stereotypes assume that individuals will conform to societal expectations based on their perceived gender, often reinforcing inequality and discrimination. Gender stereotypes can be explicit or implicit. They contribute to gender-based discrimination in public and private spheres.

Heteronormativity is a social and cultural system that assumes heterosexuality is the natural, normal and superior sexual orientation. It enforces rigid, binary gender roles and privileges relationships between cisgender men and women, while marginalising LGBT+ identities.

Homophobia is fear, hatred or discrimination against homosexuality and LGBT+ individuals. It manifests in personal attitudes, social norms, institutional policies and cultural representations that stigmatise, exclude or oppress non-heterosexual people. Homophobia is a tool of heteronormativity and patriarchy, reinforcing rigid gender roles and privileging heterosexuality.

Patriarchy is a social, political and economic system in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control over resources, while women and other marginalised genders are subordinated. Patriarchy is a structural system of power, not just individual male dominance. It operates through laws, customs, social norms, cultural practices and economic structures that privilege masculinity and reinforce gender inequality.

Sex is typically understood as the biological and physiological characteristics that distinguish male and female bodies, such as reproductive anatomy, chromosomes and hormone levels. Historically, sex has been understood as a biological binary – male and female – based on physical characteristics such as chromosomes (XX = female, XY = male), reproductive anatomy (e.g. presence of ovaries or testes), and hormonal differences (e.g. oestrogen and testosterone levels). More contemporary research argues that sex is a spectrum and that scientific knowledge about sex is shaped by cultural and political forces.

Sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) is a framework that integrates both sexual and reproductive health and the human rights associated with them. SRHR emphasises that individuals have the right to make informed decisions about their sexuality and reproduction without discrimination, coercion or violence. It encompasses access to a range of services, education and information that are essential for wellbeing and dignity.

Transphobia is fear, hatred or discrimination against transgender, non-binary and gender-non-conforming individuals. It is both an individual prejudice and a systemic form of oppression that reinforces the gender binary and marginalises gender identities that fall outside the traditional categories of male and female.

Content warning

This research focuses on mapping key gender norms in Armenia, Georgia and Poland and discusses sensitive and potentially distressing topics. These include reproductive rights and abortion, and violence against women and children including sexualised violence, homophobia and transphobia.

Note: Toponyms in the region are a source of conflict and disagreement. International Alert has developed a policy in close consultation with local partners that acknowledges these conflicts while remaining sensitive to the opposing views that exist around them.

Executive summary

The examination of social norms pertaining to gender roles and gendered expectations is essential to establishing how gender and identity disinformation (GID) operates in a given context. GID often builds on, exacerbates and manipulates pre-existing gender norms in the service of broader, sometimes hidden, social and political goals. An in-depth understanding of dominant gender norms provides insight into GID dynamics and how they work, and also enables them to be countered more effectively.

This report examines gender norms and attitudes in Armenia, Georgia and Poland and how they relate to GID. Various national and international actors use GID to target individuals based on gender and sexual orientation to discredit, intimidate and silence high-profile women, gender-diverse and LGBT+ individuals, including politicians, activists and journalists, undermining democratic participation, threatening individual rights, and weakening democratic processes and social cohesion.

The report examines the deeply held societal biases about gender and sexuality which GID exploits, targeting those who are vulnerable to violence and abuse due to existing discrimination. This tactic lends false legitimacy to these attacks, amplifying their impact while concealing the political motives of the GID actors. GID operates as a multi-vector threat, which simultaneously undermines human rights, democratic values and, in turn, national security through an escalating pattern of harm — from targeted harassment to systemic instability.

Countering GID that is rooted in a manipulation of legitimate anxieties amongst the population about social change and cultural preservation requires an insight-focused approach, in collaboration with local and international actors to build social cohesion and resilience against the interference of malign, foreign actors.

This research report was commissioned by Artemis Alliance to examine dominant gender norms and gender-related public debates in Armenia, Georgia and Poland, as well as briefly mapping the respective GID 'ecosystems'. Artemis Alliance is an international network of civil society organisations (CSOs) that aims to counter GID to build social cohesion and resilience against foreign malign actors' interference. Its vision is cohesive, democratic societies where all members participate fully, free from polarising divisions and foreign malign actors' interference. The pilot phase was funded by the UK government from January 2023 to March 2025.

Methodology

This report discusses the key findings from research conducted in Armenia, Georgia and Poland between April 2023 and March 2024. The report draws on 16 expert interviews, a phone-based survey of 1,200 Armenians, 1,400 Georgians and 1,200 Poles, and 26 focus groups in the three countries, as well as desk-based research and a social media analysis. The expert interviews were conducted in mid-2023 with a second round in early 2024, and the phone interviews were conducted in December 2023. The focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out in January and February 2024. The social media survey examined Armenian, Georgian and Polish Facebook posts dated between late 2021 and late 2023, with a focus on gender-related terms.

Country contexts

Armenian gender relations have been influenced by the country's political past, as well as contemporary geopolitical and security challenges. Strong nationalist sentiments can be directly linked to the memory of the traumatic events under the Ottoman Empire during World War I (recognised by many countries as genocide) and the current conflict with Azerbaijan, reinforcing a sense of a nation under threat. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restitution of Armenian independence, some socially conservative actors, including nationalist political parties and individual members of the Armenian Apostolic clergy, rejected gender equality as being antithetical to what was framed as 'Armenian values'. The term 'gender' has been highly politicised since 2013 when the so-called 'gender hysteria' discussion started with the introduction of a law on gender equality. Among the key gender-related issues currently being debated in Armenia, gender roles, rights linked to diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), as well as sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), are the most hotly debated, with GID actors often mobilising homophobia, transphobia, pro-natalist sentiments, and a narrative of 'Armenian values' being under threat.

The political situation in Georgia has been tumultuous in recent years. In January 2025, the Georgian parliament passed and brought into force the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. This contentious legislation, passed amid ongoing, large-scale protests across Georgia, seeks to register any organisations that receive over 20% of their funding from abroad as "organisations acting in the interest of a foreign power". This law, very similar to one in Russia, is likely to stifle civil society and force non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to move abroad. This legislation has also led to the suspension of Georgia's accession to the European Union, and the United States imposing sanctions on Georgian Dream politicians.[1] Furthermore, Georgia recently introduced new rules complicating access to abortion and the Georgian Dream proposed anti-LGBT+ legislation. The Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors reiterates the existing ban on same-sex marriage, prohibits adoption by LGBT+ people, outlaws what the government defines as "LGBT propaganda", and targets transgender people's rights. These legal changes are similar to existing Russian laws,[2] but are also inspired by transphobic messaging and activism in western Europe.[3] The Georgian parliament has also recently removed electoral quotas for women.[4] Given that gender is very much at the forefront of Georgia's 'culture wars', mapping social norms is key.

Poland has seen extensive politicisation of gender issues and spread of GID over the past 15 years, especially on issues relating to SOGIESC and SRHR, in particular abortion. This was especially evident between 2015 and 2023 when the rightwing government of the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) party, with vocal support from members of the Catholic Church and rightwing groups, implemented its staunchly conservative social policies, including severely restricting the right to abortion. Simultaneously, Poland has also seen a proliferation of an array of parties, foundations, think tanks and media organisations, ranging from socially conservative to extreme right, often with transnational connections, which are actively engaged in the dissemination of GID. At the same time, civil society is actively working to counter GID and promote women's and diverse SOGIESC rights. A new government led by Donald Tusk, which took power in late 2023, has promised to liberalise access to abortion, although this had not happened at the time of writing due to internal political opposition. The new government has also undertaken measures to reduce the previous influence of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość on public broadcasting.

Key findings

Contentious issues

- **An ambiguous and often partial understanding of the term 'gender', at times shaped by 'anti-gender' GID:** The term gender has been politicised in all three countries, which has led to a lack of clarity about its meaning. It is perceived as a synonym for sex, sexuality or gender equality, but also negatively associated with diverse SOGIESC and threats to 'traditional family values'. There was a concern amongst respondents around education of children in relation to gender identity in Poland and controversy around Pride events in Georgia.

- **Gender equality and binary gender role expectations:** In all three countries, there was a strong belief among a majority of respondents that gender equality has already been achieved, although this was more contested in Poland. Among some respondents, this led to pushback against calls for more gender equality. The belief in the realisation of gender equality was often not seen as incompatible with binary and differential expectations of the roles of women and men in society, even if these may deviate from lived realities.

- **Gender roles and SRHR:** Armenian and Georgian gender relations continue to be defined by traditional gender roles and expectations, combined with economic and geopolitical pressures – women being mothers first and foremost, while having to work, and men being the breadwinners and defenders of the nation. Such gender conservatism also persists in Poland, but gender roles are also seen as undergoing a generational shift. Still, Polish women are seen as multitaskers who effectively manage home and work. Reproduction has been politicised, be it in relation to anxiety around survival of the nation in Armenia or abortion in Poland.

- **High levels of homophobia and transphobia:** Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected during this study show that there are high levels of homophobia and transphobia in Armenia and Georgia and, to a lesser degree, in Poland. This was most visible when it came to people of diverse SOGIESC having or adopting children or being teachers.

- **Anxiety around survival of the nation and tradition:** In Armenia particularly, gender debates are closely linked to historical narratives of occupation, repression and genocide, and fears for the nation's survival have been rekindled by the 2020 Nagorny Karabakh war and the demise of the unrecognised Nagorny Karabakh Republic in 2023. The research also revealed significant levels of anxiety around perceptions of 'traditional' values being under threat in Georgia. Participants' responses underscored a focus on procreation, including pervasive disapproval of abortion unless the life of the mother is in danger, despite high abortion rates in Armenia and Georgia. A substantial minority of Poles believe traditional values are under threat, with men much more likely than women to see the threat as emanating from LGBT+ activists, the EU, other foreign governments, or women's rights activists.

- **Ambivalence towards the church's role in defining gender norms:** Despite an overwhelming majority of respondents identifying as belonging to the dominant local church (Armenian Apostolic Church, Georgian Orthodox Church, or Polish Catholic Church, respectively), in all three countries a majority disagreed with the notion that the predominant church had the right to intervene in people's personal decisions on sensitive gender issues. Most respondents also did not see the church as influencing their perception of gender-related issues. Nonetheless, even within these demographics, socially conservative views were often in the majority.

- **Local, internationally-networked GID ecosystems have taken root in Armenia, Georgia, and Poland:** Over the past two decades, well-networked ecosystems of GID actors have grown in Armenia, Georgia and Poland, including political parties that have been or are in power. The social media analysis found widespread GID messaging and an amplification of these online.

GID actors

In all three countries, GID ecosystems are dynamic and well networked, both inside the country and internationally. These ecosystems consist of a variety of individual actors, political parties and movements, foundations, think tanks and media outlets. They often form temporary coalitions despite differences, and amplify, recycle and multiply GID messaging internationally and nationally.

The majority of the respondents identified as belonging to the locally dominant religious denomination, but most simultaneously refuted that the church has an active role in defining gender norms and behaviours, and only a few saw faith leaders as being influential in their own lives in this respect. Nonetheless, the centuries-long association between national identity and the respective dominant church and their continued social and political role make them influential actors.

Increasingly, GID is overlapping with other forms of disinformation (e.g. health-based such as anti-vaccine or xenophobic disinformation), and GID actors are using new online and offline spaces to engage with their audiences. Especially in Poland, the study indicated the increased influence of male supremacist and anti-gender equality views among young men, echoing findings from other research.

The various GID actors in play do not fully share political and societal goals, but often coalesce around certain topics or issues. The actors themselves and the platforms they use also change frequently. The interplay, whether intentional or not, between more and less extreme actors allows for a more radical shifting of the 'Overton window'[5] on gender issues than the less extreme actors could achieve on their own, while at the same time allowing them to seem 'more reasonable' in contrast to their more extreme counterparts.

Recommendations

- **Use research to better understand how and why GID resonates with a given audience.** Understanding dominant gender norms and expectations, and the narratives around these, is central to understanding how and why different groups and individuals are susceptible to GID, and thus also to countering this messaging. It is important not to assume that particular demographics are more susceptible than others; the picture emerging from the research is complicated.

- **Calibrate programming to target audiences based on granular research.** Any work that challenges gender stereotypes needs to be carefully contextualised and focused on the particular aims of the target audience and the programming. For messaging to be effective, it is key that it is conducted via a medium that reaches the target audiences and is transmitted in a format that resonates with them.

- **Be wary of misappropriations of the term 'gender' and of anti-LGBT+ sentiments.** It is key that any programming mitigates the risks of being challenged by anti-gender forces or being misunderstood/misconstrued. Any work that focuses on gender equality in Armenia, Georgia, and Poland will have to consider two key challenges. First, the work is likely to be opposed by a significant proportion of the population that thinks gender equality has already been achieved and that the work undermines the local culture and traditions. Second, the work represents an extension of unwanted foreign influence. Importantly, the term 'gender' has itself been misappropriated by GID actors, leading to confusion about its meaning. Any work focusing on LGBT+ rights is likely to experience even more vehement resistance on similar grounds. Local ownership and locally-crafted messaging are essential to mitigate any counter-GID work being seen as 'outside interference'.

- **Employ mitigating strategies against risks and resistance to programming.** These risks are very visible in the current political and regional security situation. Whether it is the political flux in Armenia in the aftermath of the fall of the de facto Nagorny Karabakh Republic, Georgian Dream's openly anti-gender stance and policies, or politicisation of reproductive rights and LGBT+ issues in Poland, gender issues may be mobilised by nationalist groups to a greater degree than to date, necessitating a programming approach that is flexible with localised decision-making to enable quick responses as circumstances change.

- **Be aware that programming itself may be perceived as disinformation.** Programming design needs to be cognisant of the fact that substantial parts of the target audience may in fact view this messaging itself as constituting disinformation. Careful calibration and testing of messaging, messengers, and the means of transmitting these are essential and will need to be closely tailored to different audiences.

- **Make conflict sensitivity central to programming.** Ongoing militarised threat produces high levels of anxiety among the populations studied, but especially Armenians. While militarisation persists, it is vital that gender equality and LGBT+ rights are represented as key to national unity and resilience. Many programme participants may think they do not know anyone who is LGBT+. Thinking about the ways in which people who would not normally engage with one another could meet and share life stories and experiences in a safe space would be an effective way of overcoming societal divides.

- **Ensure the safety of all individuals and groups involved in programming.** GID ecosystems are gaining strength in all three countries. It is therefore likely that any gender-related programming in these contexts will be challenged by GID networks. The current Armenian and Polish governments promote aspects of gender equality in their legislation, but in Georgia the relatively recent Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, combined with anti-LGBT+ laws and attitudes, could lead to safety risks for everyone involved in programming. Take all possible safety measures when designing programming.

- **Use historical entry points.** Many Armenians, Georgians and Poles are very proud of their history and traditions. As such, historical entry points that highlight equality and women's empowerment may be a potential entry point for some target audiences. At the same time, it is important to challenge the idea that gender inequality has been eradicated or that 'gender' is a foreign concept not applicable in local contexts.

- **Conduct further research into the impact of manosphere narratives.** Although evidence is limited to one focus group in the Polish capital, some young Polish men report grievances about women and minorities having more rights than them and feminism going 'too far'. There is evidence of engagement with the global 'manosphere' and 'Incel' ideology. This is an important and potentially very threatening phenomenon that needs to be acknowledged and addressed. It is worth considering programming tailored towards men who feel this grievance and anxiety, but more research is needed on how widespread this sentiment is among Polish men, as well as Armenian and Georgian men.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

Various national and international actors use gender and identity disinformation (GID) to target individuals based on their gender and sexual orientation. This approach aims to discredit, intimidate and silence high-profile women and gender-diverse and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender identities (LGBT+) individuals, including politicians, activists and journalists, undermining democratic participation, threatening individual rights and weakening democratic processes and social cohesion.

GID operates as a multi-vector threat that simultaneously undermines human rights, democratic values and, in turn, national security through an escalating pattern of harm — from targeted harassment to systemic instability. GID exploits deeply held societal biases about gender and sexuality, targeting those who are vulnerable to violence and abuse due to existing discrimination. This tactic lends false legitimacy to these attacks, amplifying their impact while concealing the political motives of the GID actors.

In order to better understand the GID dynamics in the three countries, this research was commissioned to examine dominant gender norms and gender-related public debates in these contexts, as well as briefly map the respective GID 'ecosystems', focusing especially on national actors. The study gives a snapshot of the situation during the period from April 2023 to March 2024 when the research was conducted.

1.2 Methodology and limitations

The research consisted of several stages:

- extensive literature review and expert interviews;
- quantitative survey focusing on gender norms;
- focus group discussions (FGDs) on gender norms; and
- social media analysis

Expert interviews

The researchers conducted 16 expert interviews between April 2023 and February 2024, including experts from the three focus contexts as well as thematic and regional experts. The interviewees were both academic researchers and civil society actors.

Surveys

Surveys were conducted by the local research institutions using a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method in Armenia and Georgia between 20 and 26 December 2023. A total of 1,200 interviews were completed in Armenia and 1,400 in Georgia. The questions were divided into

two groups, with half of the participants being asked one set of questions and the other half asked the other set. In Poland, an online survey of 1,200 participants was conducted in January 2024. The survey participants were sampled to be demographically representative.

FGDs

There were eight FGDs in Armenia, 10 in Georgia and eight in Poland to gain more in-depth qualitative findings. They were geographically spread across the countries to capture a variety of views and any differences between rural and urban areas. The Armenian and Georgian FGDs were mixed in terms of gender and age, whereas the Polish FGDs were separated on the basis of gender and age. The FGDs were conducted by local research institutions. The discussions explored the following themes:

- participants' perception of an ideal (in Poland, typical) man and woman;
- the distribution of roles and responsibilities between women and men;
- the actors influencing participants' attitudes towards gender relations;
- understandings of the term 'gender';
- attitudes towards abortion;
- attitudes towards LGBT+ people;
- perceptions of traditional values and threats to these values;
- media consumption habits; and
- media influence on participants' perception of gender roles.

Social media analysis

Social media analyses were conducted in all three countries to evaluate gendered and identity-based norms, given the increased centrality of social media debates on social norms. The analysis focused on Facebook, given that this was the most used social media platform in all three contexts. Facebook allows for an analysis of public posts, which somewhat limits the analysis in some respects, but nevertheless provides an important snapshot of contemporary discussions.

Other messaging channels are also used for discussing gender issues, as well as spreading mis- and disinformation, but many of these such as Signal, Telegram and WhatsApp groups are difficult, if not impossible, to monitor and analyse without being a member. The social media analyses in all three countries were conducted by local research organisations.

2. Country backgrounds

The historical, social, political and economic trajectories of Armenia, Georgia and Poland are markedly different in many ways, but also share some commonalities. All three countries have a rich cultural history, closely connected to Apostolic, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, respectively. All three have also experienced centuries of foreign domination coupled with mass violence against the civilian population by the occupying powers. All three also share, though in different ways, the experience of decades of state socialism and a politically and socio-economically turbulent transition period thereafter.[6] Whether they were, like Armenia and Georgia, part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or a closely allied satellite state as in the case of Poland, current gender relations

and norms are impacted by this legacy.[7] The bitter historical memories of foreign occupation, for example, influence gendered expectations whereby women should bear children for the sake of the survival of the nation, while pro-gender equality policies are often, and at times inaccurately, associated in public debate with the socialist era by conservative actors. In all three countries, gender roles and norms have become a key area of political contestation, especially in the past decade, leading to social polarisation but also increased levels of GID. Each country has its own 'ecosystem' of GID actors, who are also internationally highly networked.

2.1 Socialist legacies

The enforcement of equality from the top in the USSR and the Polish People's Republic meant that, in principle at least, women enjoyed greater socio-economic equality and more rights than women in the West. Abortion was legalised, divorce law was simplified, and women were encouraged, and often required, to join the labour force.[8] Women were encouraged to participate in politics, though political leadership across the board remained a male domain. In practice, women remained underpaid compared with men, were expected to do most of the unpaid domestic work, and be (socialist) mothers. Rights related to diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) were non-existent and the persecution of LGBT+ individuals was widespread. Ideologically this was underpinned by labelling LGBT+ people as 'bourgeois', 'decadent' and 'immoral' and questioning their loyalty to the state and party, but was also buttressed by widespread homophobia and transphobia.[9] Although gender inequality both at work and at home persisted during the socialist period, gender equality in the transition period was often negatively associated with the previous regime and concepts such as emancipation and solidarity were often pejoratively labelled as 'neo-Marxist'.[10]

2.2 Politicisation of 'gender', geo-politics, and polarisation

The breakdown of the USSR saw Armenia and Georgia regaining independence, while freeing Poland to pursue internal and external policies independently of the Soviet Union. The processes of nation-building often relied on rejecting policies associated with state socialism, including those related to gender equality. Post-socialist gender discourses in the three contexts – and more broadly in both Central and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus – have been described as a "conservative turn", "re-familiarisation" or "maternalism".[11] This has included the popularisation of "gendered national ideolog[ies] aiming at securing and legitimising male domination [which have] become a part of national ideology and nation-building across post-Soviet space".[12] Some authors use the concept of the so-called 'illiberal East';[13] this imagined geography posits itself as incompatible with the West. According to this narrative, if the West "has come to stand for human rights, individualism, homosexuality and sexual liberalism and imperialism, then 'the East' speaks in the language of cultural rights, collective forms of identification, is anti-LGBT+, promotes traditional family values, and resists imperialism and 'Western' values".[14]

This East versus West narrative, especially with respect to gender issues, has been openly advocated by Russian foreign policy and media outlets, often drawing on 'Eurasianist' ideologies, such as

that propagated by Aleksandr Dugin.[15] The Russian Federation has played an important role in shaping gender debates in the region as "the rhetoric on 'traditional values' espoused by the Russian government under Vladimir Putin has resonated beyond the cultural and geographical sphere of Russian Orthodoxy".[16] While this is in part linked to explicit political agendas, it is also anchored in the Russian worldview, which emphasises Russia's alleged messianic saviour role in countering the West, and thereby 'saving' humanity and Christianity more broadly. Using the term 'Gayropa' (a fusion of the words 'gay' and 'Europe'), Russia promotes the narrative of "Europe as a centre of norms strange to Slavic people, such as same-sex marriage or so-called 'gender ideology'".[17]

Linkages to Russia can, however, also be a complicating factor to differing degrees for GID actors in Armenia, Georgia and Poland, given Russia's historical role as an occupying power and a regional hegemon, as well as its aggressively expansionist rhetoric in the context of its war in Ukraine. In Poland, the memories of Russian and Soviet direct and indirect rule, and the strong role of the Catholic rather than Orthodox Church, make this narrative far less appealing, and complicate associations of nationalists with Russia. In Armenia and Georgia, nationalists also keep a degree of distance from the idea of Russian hegemony and supremacy underpinning much of Eurasianist thought, although ties are closer due to the countries' economic interests, as well as the reach of the Russian media, especially in Armenia.

In the period covered by this research, the current ruling party in Georgia, Georgian Dream, and the main opposition party in Armenia have employed rhetoric on gender issues that is very similar to that of the Russian government.[18] In the case of Georgia, this has been especially visible in the government's efforts to push through a new law on the registration of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and an anti-LGBT+ Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors. Some anti-Russian nationalists have, however, instead try to cast Armenians and Georgians as "more authentic guardians of 'European Christian values'" than contemporary Europeans, especially with respect to gender issues, and point to far-right European figures such as Le Pen, Meloni or Orban as ideological allies.[19] In Poland, and to a lesser degree in Armenia and Georgia, GID actors also have links to western European and North American groups and actors, and the influence of particular narratives such as 'red pill' masculinity and anti-feminism is visible.[20]

In all three contexts, there continues to be a strong adherence to traditional gender norms, including of women as mothers and men as breadwinners and defenders of the nation. Simultaneously, however, all three countries have vibrant civil societies and strong networks of gender rights activists, even if they often come under severe pressure and have to work within limited political spaces. At the time of writing, these pressures were most acute in Georgia.

2.3 Armenia

Armenia is a landlocked nation in the South Caucasus with a population of approximately 2.8 million. Armenia's historical narrative is strongly influenced by Armenian Apostolic Christianity. The country sees itself as the successor of the first state to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 CE, and the Armenian Apostolic Church continues to be a major socio-cultural influence, with an estimated 93% of Armenians identifying as adherents of the church.[21]

Modern Armenian history has been shaped by the narratives of Armenian Genocide towards the end of the Ottoman period in 1915-16, its inclusion in the USSR as the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic,

and three and a half decades of restored independence. The period starting with the break-up of the Soviet Union and continuing until today has been marked by the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh, an Armenian-majority enclave on territory internationally recognised as being part of Azerbaijan. Following successful Azerbaijani offensives in 2020 and 2023, the self-proclaimed Armenian-majority Nagorny Karabakh Republic dissolved itself in November 2023. As evidenced by this research, these events have stoked anxieties over the survival of the Armenian nation, which can be mobilised to reinforce calls for a return to what are framed as 'traditional family values' and pro-natalist policies.

Armenia aligned itself politically with Russia during the first decades of its reinstated independence, including joining the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union. Relations started to decline, however, following the 2018 Velvet Revolution [22]and the lack of Russian support in the 2020 war and 2023 offensive by Azerbaijan. These led the current government of Nikol Pashinyan to increasingly distance itself from Russia and seek closer ties with western countries, including the European Union (EU). The main opposition party, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), has increasingly used 'anti-gender' rhetoric, in part echoing Russian narratives.[23] Pashinyan's government has come under domestic pressure for making concessions to Azerbaijan and the nationalist opposition has often used highly gendered rhetoric to attack the government.[24] At the time of the research, Armenian civil society activists were also concerned about the potential impact on Armenia of the political developments in Georgia, as discussed in section 2.2.[25]

Gender equality in Armenia

Gender equality in Armenia has improved in the past few years, with the country rising to 64th position (out of 146) in 2024 in the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index, up from 102nd in 2016.[26] Armenia has signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has signed, but not ratified, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). A 2021 survey of 4,014 women aged 15-59 years found that 17.2% had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partners, out of whom 4.6% had experienced this during the previous 12 months. The prevalence for psychological abuse was noticeably higher at 31.8%.[27]

A new law on preventing and responding to domestic violence was passed by the Armenian parliament on 12 April 2024, including more comprehensive definitions of violence, a more inclusive definition of families and partnerships, stronger sanctions against perpetrators and greater investment into prevention and response.[28] One of the more contentious issues in the debate leading up to the passing of the law was the proposed broadening of the term 'domestic and family violence' to include partnerships between non-married people, which conservative critics alleged amounted to a recognition of same-sex partnerships.[29] Previous attempts at passing new legislation on domestic violence have stalled because they have been portrayed as external (in particular EU) interference in domestic issues.[30] Homosexuality was decriminalised in Armenia in 2003, but same-sex relationships are still not recognised and there is widespread discrimination against persons of diverse SOGIESC.

Abortion is legal upon request up to the first trimester of pregnancy, and in special medical or unspecified social circumstances up to 22 weeks of pregnancy.[31] According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2019 data, gender-biased sex-selective abortions, outlawed in 2016, remain an issue of concern, although there has been an improvement over past decades. In the early 2000s the ratio of boys to girls was 120 to 100, but by 2019 it was 110 boys per 100 girls.[32]

Gender discourse in Armenia

Following the restoration of independence in 1991, like many other post-socialist societies, Armenia saw a marked shift away from the Soviet-era rhetoric (as opposed to actual, lived practice) of gender equality, with conservative and nationalist politicians as well as individual members of the Armenian Apostolic Church framing women's empowerment and gender equality as "antithetical to Armenian values".[33] As outlined by Ani Jilozian (2017), traditional family values and dominant gender stereotypes in Armenia tend to "enforce the notion that men should be dominant and women subservient and submissive. Justifications for inequality are frequently based on cultural and social norms that socialise men to be aggressive, powerful, unemotional, and controlling, and women to be passive, nurturing, submissive, emotional, powerless, and dependent on men".[34]

The term 'gender' was used mainly in policy, academic and NGO discourse for the first two decades of Armenia's restored independence, chiefly in connection with women's rights or women's empowerment, but around 2013 the term became the focus of immense political and social controversy. The main trigger for this was the draft law on gender equality, which was subsequently renamed the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men due to political pressure from conservative groups.[35] This 'anti-gender' campaign occurred close to the time when Armenia joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, and much of the rhetoric echoed similar arguments commonly propagated by Russian state authorities and media, as well as proponents of 'Eurasianism'.[36]

In the course of the debate in Armenia, 'gender' became equated with sex change, paedophilia, bestiality and homosexuality, and those advocating for gender equality were portrayed as "'traitors to the country', 'destroyers of families', a 'threat to Armenian values' and accessories to the sexual abuse of minors".[37] The term started to be used as an adjective to "describe anything perverted and sinful – anything that will undermine traditional Armenian values and families"[38] and as a noun to refer to people as 'genders', meaning "feminists and homosexuals that have no right to be part of the Armenian nation".[39] Siran Hovhannisyan (2018) further explains how these campaigns cast homosexuality as a western import that could spread in Armenia and make reproduction impossible, thereby destroying the nation. At the same time, in the media, the new domestic violence legislation was portrayed as designed to lead to the break-up of families, so that children would be used for child sex abuse, adopted by gay couples abroad, and/or used for organ harvesting. Echoing similar legislation in Russia, a member of parliament (MP) of the previously governing RPA, Eduard Sharmazanov, unsuccessfully proposed a law in 2018 to ban "homosexual propaganda".[40]

Beyond the term itself, Armenian gender discourse is closely tied to the country's history of genocide and conflict. This includes attitudes and debates around women's and men's expected gender roles, as well as on issues such as diverse SOGIESC rights and abortion. Motherhood and procreation are central themes in Armenia and mothers are called upon to revive the nation after decades of imperialism and genocide.[41] Research shows that "the most specific feature of the Armenian gender order is the attitude toward premarital sex and public fetishisation of virginity".[42] The sense of a nation under siege was further escalated by Armenia's losses in the 2020 Nagorny Karabakh war, the fall of de facto NKR and the lack of support by the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In terms of masculinities – and increasingly also femininities – this led in part to a militarisation of gender role expectations and a heightened focus on reproduction to 'replace' the losses from the conflicts and ensure the continuity of the Armenian nation. One expert interviewee noted the emergence of new military-style training camps run by nationalist NGOs and the highlighting of women's role in the military. They also noted that LGBT+ people were often accused of avoiding their 'patriotic duties'

by allegedly not defending the nation and/or not having children.[43] According to this interviewee, however, many LGBT+ people were in fact serving in the military, but could not be open about their SOGIESC, while the idea of openly LGBT+ people having or adopting children was vehemently opposed by many Armenians. Another expert highlighted increasing public discussions about the need for women to bear more children, including through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and having children at an older age through fertility treatments.

Activists and civil society organisations (CSOs) highlighted the issue of verbal attacks against feminists and women peacebuilders. With pacifism being one of the core principles of feminist politics, feminist activists are often branded as traitors to the cause of national survival and territorial integrity. Given the persistent patriarchal norms, feminist activists and women peacebuilders are at particular risk of attacks, including GID.[44]

Anti-LGBT+ sentiment and violence in the country have in the past focused particularly on gay men, who are often also accused of paedophilia, but according to expert interviewees, anti-trans rhetoric and violence have increased in recent years. Lesbian women are often depicted in a sexualised light in public discourse or as not fulfilling their 'patriotic duty' as mothers, while the existence of bisexuality is often denied altogether.[45]

While the gendered lives of women and girls have been the focus of women's rights and empowerment activities – and/or an object of societal scrutiny and control – and diverse SOGIESC rights and identities have been hotly contested, masculinities beyond defending the nation have been less explicitly visible in public debates. They are, however, implicitly ever-present, especially in the men-dominated political sphere, in which 'proving' one's own and discrediting the opponent's heterosexual masculinity have been a key undercurrent in public discourse.[46]

2.4 Georgia

Georgia is a multi-ethnic nation-state of around 3.7 million inhabitants located in the Caucasus; up to 30% of the population identifies as belonging to an ethnic minority.[47] The country borders Russia to the north and northeast, the Black Sea to the west, and Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan to the south. Christianity was adopted as a state religion in the fourth century. The Georgian kingdom was substantial during the medieval period, but later succumbed to Turkish and Persian domination. In the 19th century, Georgia was annexed by the Russian Empire. The country enjoyed a brief period of independence between 1918 to 1921 before being incorporated into the Soviet Union. From 1936, Georgia was a constituent republic of the Soviet Union until it declared independence in 1991.[48]

The 1990s were defined by instability, civil unrest and armed conflict, which continue to reverberate today. During the break-up of the Soviet Union, while Georgia was re-establishing its independence, separatist movements emerged, notably in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which led to brief but bloody wars in 1991–1992 (South Ossetia) and 1992–1993 (Abkhazia), and renewed fighting in the 2008 war.[49] Although these regions are not internationally recognised, they have de facto not been under Georgian control since the early 1990s. Unlike the impact of the fall of Nagorny Karabakh in Armenia, this was not raised as an issue in the FGDs.

Parallel to these conflicts, Georgia was also embroiled in a civil war from 1991 to 1993. For most of the decade after the end of the civil war, the country was led by former Soviet foreign minister, Eduard

Shevardnadze, who was overthrown in 2003 in what was named the Rose Revolution. In November 2003, Mikhail Saakashvili took power and the country pursued a strongly pro-western foreign policy externally and neoliberal economic policies internally. The 2008 war involving Georgian and Russian forces (and viewed in Georgia as Russian invasion) occurred during Saakashvili's second term and was a military disaster for Georgia. In the 2012 elections, the Georgian Dream (GD) party gained power and continued to rule at the time of the research, following a disputed electoral victory in 2024.

Decreasing civic space and gender rollback

Under Saakashvili, and for the first decade or so under GD, Georgia maintained close relations to the West and gained candidate status to the EU in December 2023.[50] The relationship with the EU, alongside other international organisations, is seen as critical for the adoption of pro-gender equality laws, but has also led to resistance against them.[51] During this period, Georgia's legal framework on gender equality steadily improved. Georgia ratified the CEDAW in 1994, signed the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, and signed and ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2017.[52] National legislation prohibits gender discrimination and guarantees gender equality under Article 11 of Georgia's Constitution. In 2010, the Law of Georgia on Gender Equality was adopted, which further strengthened gender equality legislation. Finally, the 2014 Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination introduced the concept of multiple discrimination. Georgia also adopted new legislation on domestic violence in 2016 and sexual harassment in 2018.[53] In terms of LGBT+ rights, the Criminal Code adopted in 2000 no longer contains an article criminalising male homosexuality. The constitution does not specifically mention sexuality or sexual orientation as grounds for discrimination, but Georgia is a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights, which recognises sexual orientation as a basis for non-discrimination.[54] Same-sex marriage is not recognised by law and there is widespread discrimination against persons of diverse SOGIESC. In 2024, Georgia ranked 69th (out of 146) in the WEF Gender Gap Index, an improvement by 25 places since 2016.[55]

Over the years, however, the GD's policies have become increasingly socially conservative, its foreign policy more pro-Russian and its policies against opponents more repressive. This has included a two-pronged legislative push that escalated in 2023-2024, aimed at reducing civic political space on the one hand and simultaneously introducing socially conservative gender legislation on the other. The main effort in terms of the former was the passing of a Russia-inspired Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, targeting CSOs and independent media and threatening the rights to freedom of association and expression.[56] The proposed legislation led to mass protests that were countered with heavy-handed repression. The linking of the two political strategies – the repression of civil society space and increased gender conservatism – was evident in the fact that the government had originally planned to adopt the 'foreign agents' law symbolically on 17 May 2024, the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, but which was rebranded as 'Family Purity Day' by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2014. The law was finally adopted on 28 May after parliament overturned the presidential veto. It was followed by strong international disapproval and ultimately the EU stopping Georgia's accession process.[57]

In 2016, the Prime Minister of Georgia proposed an amendment to the constitution that redefined marriage as between a man and a woman rather than between two individuals. The amendment came into effect in 2018 and was widely criticised by human rights groups and NGOs for effectively disallowing same-sex marriages. In 2023, the GD government signed a bill to ban certain gender-affirming care for minors, and parliament gender equality quotas were repealed in 2024.[58] In spring 2024, the government introduced a draft bill to prohibit people from changing their gender, ban public celebrations of same-sex relationships, and explicitly prohibit same-sex couples from adopting

children.[59] The proposed Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors was intended to counter what members of the ruling party described as "LGBT propaganda".[60] This led the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, to issue a statement of concern and remind Georgia of its human rights obligations.[61]

Based on the expert interviews, the simultaneous push for the two laws – the anti-LGBT+ law and the law on foreign influence – was in part meant to send a message to the electorate that if they were against the 'foreign agents' law that meant they were for LGBT+ 'propaganda', a message that seemed to find some resonance.[62]

Gender equality and discourse in Georgia

Georgia remains a relatively socially conservative society when it comes to gender relations. Men are expected to be the breadwinners and decision-makers, while women are expected to care for the family and look after the household.[63] This contrasts with the tendency of Georgia's elites to emphasise the long history of women in politics, notably Queen Tamar,[64] implying that gender equality is rooted in local history. This is at odds with the male elite dominating Georgian politics. Pro-gender equality norms and rules have at times been portrayed by their opponents as being imposed by the EU on Georgia.[65]

Gender inequality continues to persist in Georgia, with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Group noting:

> *"Georgian women dedicate five times more hours to unpaid domestic and care work compared to men. This disproportionate burden limits their opportunities for economic advancement. The gender pay gap further compounds the challenge, with women earning a staggering 24.6% less than men for the same work."*[66]

Violence against women is a persistent problem in Georgia. A UN Women study from 2018 found that "approximately 14% of partnered women in the 15-64 age range had experienced physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence at the hands of an intimate partner".[67] This figure is significant in and of itself, but needs to be considered in relation to pervasive under-reporting of domestic violence. A 2017 World Bank report stated that 82% of women who experienced violence did not report it to the police, with 61% worried that doing so would stigmatise them.[68] Femicide is prevalent in Georgia. The Social Justice Centre reported that "[d]espite the strict policy on violations against women and domestic violence, the rate of murders of women and attempted murders remains high".[69]

Abortion was decriminalised in 1920 by the Soviet government, before being recriminalised in 1936.[70] In 1956, it was liberalised again in the USSR, including in Georgia. Access to contraception remained scarce for women in the region. This may explain why after 1991 there was a sharp decline in abortion as contraception became more available. Even despite this sharp decline, Georgia has one of the highest rates of abortions in the world. CRRC notes that according to UN data from 2004 to 2005, there were 19.1 abortions per 1,000 women in Georgia.[71] According to the UNFPA, "Georgia still had a Total Induced Abortion Rate (TIAR) of 0.9094 in 2018. This corresponds to 26 abortions per 1,000 women of fertile age".[72]

Sex-selective abortion has been an issue in Georgia in the past. The sex-ratio at birth jumped from 106 boys to 100 girls before 1990 to 119 boys to 100 girls in 1999;[73] however, this period of rapid increase was followed by a decline to close to the biological norm in the 2010s.[74] The UNFPA states

that "in 2018, 107.9 males were born per 100 female births", but that despite the statistics, "son preference is still prevalent in Georgian society".[75]

It is not yet entirely clear what the effects have been of the latest sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) restrictions, which came into force on 1 January 2024. According to OC Media:

> *"From 1 January 2024, anyone seeking to terminate a pregnancy will be required to consult with an obstetric-gynaecologist, psychologist, and social worker, 'under confidential conditions, in a doctor's consultation room specially set aside for this purpose'. This comes in addition to the pre-existing requirement to observe a five-day 'cooling-off period' prior to an abortion, with the new legislation adding that violation of the buffer period threatens a doctor's right to practise."*[76]

Abortion is not covered by medical insurance and it is unclear how the additional requirements outlined above will be funded. In practice, it is likely that this change will make abortion unaffordable to the majority of Georgians.

Anti-LGBT+ sentiments in Georgia

Societal levels of homophobia and transphobia in Georgia remain high. According to the Council of Europe, "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities and practices are generally not accepted in Georgian society, which is highly influenced by, among others, those views expressed by the influential Georgian Orthodox Church".[77] The LGBT+ community, which is more visible and vocal in Georgia than Armenia, faces a hostile environment and remains one of the most vulnerable groups in Georgia. A 2017 study that explored attitudes of residents of the capital city Tbilisi towards LGBT+ people concludes:

> *"Homophobia is significantly predicted by male gender, lower levels of education, acceptance of social inequality, nonliberal [sic] attitudes, and perceiving homosexuals as a 'threat to national security'. However, psychological perceptions and personal experiences also indirectly influence homophobic attitudes: the findings suggest that males report homophobic attitudes more often than females do and tend to be even more homophobic when they believe that homosexuality is inborn rather than acquired."*[78]

The Office of the Public Defender of Georgia notes:

> *"In 2023, no significant steps were taken to improve the rights situation of LGBTQI+ persons. For example, the Government of Georgia adopted the 2022–2030 National Human Rights Strategy, which, unlike other social groups, did not consider LGBT+ people and their rights-related issues/needs at all. The same approach can be observed in the National Human Rights Plan for 2024–2026."*[79]

Many of the research respondents – expert interviewees and FGD participants – highlighted the importance of the events of 17 May 2013, when the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia march was interrupted by a large number of counter-protestors, with attendees having to be escorted to safety by the police. In early May 2014, Georgia's Patriarch, Ilia II, announced 17 May as 'Family Purity Day'; since then an annual march in support of the Patriarch's decree takes place on the central avenue in Tbilisi.[80] LGBT+ Pride events have repeatedly been attacked in Tbilisi, with journalists covering the event targeted by far-right groups in 2021[81] and more than 2,000

protesters storming the event in 2023, forcing its cancellation.[82] The expert interviewees reported that the current government seems unable or unwilling to protect Pride participants.

The GD's proposed anti-LGBT+ legislation will likely further fuel existing homophobia and transphobia and limit the rights of diverse SOGIESC people. Although these laws mirror existing legislation in Russia, Georgian policy-makers noted that they were also inspired by anti-trans statements by western politicians.[83]

2.5 Poland

Poland is a country of approximately 37 million people in Central Europe, with a rich political and cultural history that traces back to ancient times. Poles adopted western Christianity in the 10th century and successfully expanded their rule in Europe, culminating in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Between 1772 and 1795, however, Poland was divided up into three partitions between the Russian and Habsburg Empires and the Kingdom of Prussia (later the German Empire). Poland regained sovereignty after the First World War, but this lasted only until 1939 when both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland at the outset of the Second World War. After the war, Poland became a satellite communist country until 1989, when it transitioned to a market economy and democracy. The historical memories of occupation, foreign domination and mass killings continue to be mobilised and reverberate in political discourse today.

The legacy of socialist rule in the 20th century significantly shaped gender politics in Poland. Although socialist ideology championed gender equality rhetorically, in the public sphere, and crucially in the labour sphere, pre-existing and new forms of patriarchy still dominated society and the state. A key pre-socialist concept was the myth of the 'Polish mother', which emerged in the 19th century. This originated in "the Veneration of [the Virgin] Mary and the feminisation of the image of the 'fatherland'".[84] The Polish mother thus became the archetype of an ideal woman, a combination of myth and stereotype that embodies what society expects of women. The Polish woman is framed as heroic and capable of bearing every burden. As A. Imbierowicz explains:

> *"Man fought for the Motherland, was involved in politics, and 'women's role was simply to endure everything and admire', as well as to give birth to successive generations of Poles – patriots. Her responsibility was to ensure continuity of Polish culture, language, customs – so it can be said that she realised unconsciously the feminist postulate that much later appeared in western feminism, namely 'the personal is political'."*[85]

During the socialist period, women participated in paid labour and the socialist state provided free childcare, paid maternity leave, and education leave. However, these legislative changes did not transform existing gender relations. In practice, women bore the double burden of carrying out paid work in the public sphere, often earning significantly less than their male counterparts, and having to do most of the unpaid work in the home.

Legislatively, gender equality is rooted in the post-socialist Polish Constitution, which grants women and men equality in different areas of life. As an EU member since 2004, the country has signed and ratified key international gender equality frameworks. Yet, Poland continues to rank relatively low on gender equality indexes. In 2023, the European Institute for Gender Equality ranked Poland 18th out

of all EU member states, a rise from 21st the year before.[86] In 2024 the WEF Global Gender Gap Index ranked Poland 51st out of 146 countries.[87]

The rise of the Polish anti-gender movement can be directly linked to the decade-long EU accession process, which led to a perceived loss of the sovereignty of the Polish state.[88] Gender equality legislation was often left in the hands of a few bureaucrats and this top-down process led to scapegoating of the EU as an imperialist power. The pushback against the EU occurred in parallel to a heightened backlash against the LGBT+ community, especially against gay men and transgender people. It also saw the introduction of restrictions on the right to abortion.[89]

The run up to the signing of the Istanbul Convention saw an intense societal and political polarisation around gender issues in Poland.[90] Articles 3 and 12-16 of the Convention were most controversial due to their definition of gender as socially constructed roles and the declared commitment of the state to promote changes in gendered social and cultural behaviour patterns.[91] This period was followed by a backlash against the so-called 'Equality Kindergarten' educational programme for pre-school children.[92] Marta Rawłuszko (2021) describes how Polish anti-gender discourse reflects the key themes employed in other countries in the region, focusing on the following elements: "(1) promoting an essentialist vision of gender roles, (2) protecting children's welfare, (3) defending parents' rights to bring up their offspring according to their own values and beliefs, and (4) objecting to equalising homosexual relations with heterosexual marriage".[93]

GID campaigns in Poland have included the establishment of so-called 'LGBT ideology-free zones' in over 100 municipalities and the deployment of buses that spread anti-abortion and anti-LGBT+ messaging in public squares (referred to colloquially as *płodobusy* and *homofobusy*).[94] In 2023, the lower house of parliament, the *Sejm*, passed a draft law (known as 'Lex Czarnek 3.0' after a previous minister for education) aiming to regulate cooperation between schools and CSOs to "protect children from sexualisation", but this was rejected by the Senate.[95]

The Polish Catholic Church, and conservative and far-right forces, have in the past been powerful actors driving the backlash against gender equality. This was especially evident between 2015 and 2023 when the rightwing government of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) party implemented its staunchly conservative social policies.

During the post-2014 European 'refugee crisis', Poland, like other EU member states from Central Europe, took an antagonistic stance towards refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.[96] This has intensified xenophobic discourses and led to intensive 'othering' of migrants and refugees.[97] The debate has been highly gendered. After the sexual assaults in Cologne on the 2015/16 New Year's Eve, the rhetoric intensified around Muslim men being a threat to Poland as a whole and particularly to white Polish women. In 2021, the Belarusian regime started facilitating the movement of refugees to and across the Polish-Belarusian border, which continues to be a serious domestic and international political issue in Poland.[98] After the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland hosted nearly one million Ukrainian refugees, mostly women and children. While many Poles have been highly supportive of this, GID actors have also sought to mobilise anti-Ukrainian sentiment and stereotypes, including casting them as a strain on the Polish economy. Societal fatigue and a "change of societal moods, usually from positive to negative attitudes towards migrants" and refugees, have been increasingly visible.[99]

As in some other countries, Poland is also seeing a trend of a gendered bifurcation in politics, especially among younger generations. Young women are increasingly leaning towards progressive

stances on social issues and men – especially younger men – towards more conservative and anti-feminist views.[100] In Poland, this has been visible in young men's support for the far-right *Konfederacja Wolność Niepodległość (Konfederacja)* party, which was mentioned by younger women in several FGDs. This trend has been linked to both homegrown and external male supremacist influences, in particular online.[101]

SRHR in Poland

Abortion has been a key theme in Polish gender debates. Abortion was partially banned in Poland in the interwar period and remained thus during the Second World War.[102] After the Stalinist period ended, the abortion law was liberalised. After 1989, the Catholic Church and rightwing parties started pressuring the government to change the regulations. In 1993, a new law was adopted, outlawing abortion in Poland, with the exception of cases where the pregnancy is the result of rape, constitutes a threat to the life or health of the woman, or there is irreversible damage to the foetus.[103] After *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* won the 2015 election, it started campaigning for even stricter abortion laws. In 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal issued a decision that virtually eliminated legal abortion.[104] Mass protests followed several cases of pregnant women dying of sepsis.[105] In December 2024, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Constitutional Tribunal ruling had violated women's rights.[106] The government led by Donald Tusk, which took power in late 2023, promised to liberalise abortion, but this had not happened at the time of writing, due to internal political opposition.[107]

The most current SRHR-related debate in Poland, as reflected in the data collected for this report, has been around access to emergency contraception, also known as the 'morning after pill'. The Tusk government put forward a bill that would have allowed over-the-counter access for women and girls aged 15 and over, but this was vetoed by the president, who is a member of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* party.[108]

Diverse SOGIESC rights in Poland

Some of the growing anti-gender backlash in Poland manifests as rising hate against the LGBT+ community. Homosexuality has been legal in Poland since 1932, but homophobia and transphobia continue to be prevalent among some parts of the population. During the communist era, homosexuality was presented as "a symptom of 'Western depravity'" and as inconsistent with "socialist morality".[109] While 1989 was seen as an opportunity for queer liberation, the end of the socialist era saw a reassertion of national, Catholic and heterosexual identity. The Polish Roman Catholic Church, which considers same-sex relationships as sinful, and associated organisations have played a key role, effectively lobbying governments to "ensure that there was no reference to sexual orientation in the non-discrimination clause of the Polish Constitution".[110] Homophobia and transphobia have been heavily politicised since 2005, reaching a crisis point shortly after with a majority of the population opposing same-sex marriage. Diverse SOGIESC have been used to juxtapose "Polish traditional values" with a "decadent West full of sexual degenerates".[111] Homosexuality has also been framed as a "threat to the nation" in terms of reproduction and the populist right demanded that so-called 'LGBT-free zones' be established in municipalities.[112] In 2023, the International Lesbian, Gay and Intersex Association (ILGA) Europe ranked Poland as the worst country in the EU in terms of receptivity to diverse SOGIESC rights.[113]

3. Findings related to gender norms

The research mapped gender norms across the three countries. An understanding of gender norms, as well as the actors influencing these norms, is key to programming because GID draws on and seeks to influence pre-existing gender norms. This section discusses the key findings thematically and compares the different national contexts. The main themes are: actors influencing gender norms; understandings of the term 'gender'; gendered roles and expectations, including views on femininity, masculinity and family relations; sexual and reproductive health and abortion; and diverse SOGIESC rights.

3.1 Actors shaping social and gender norms

Although there might be overlap between the actors influencing gender norms and GID actors, it is essential that any programming takes a broader view of who actually influences the wider discussion around gender norms. The study mapped who was influencing respondents' views on gender norms, and to what degree, using data from the survey and focus groups. The relative importance of the church and distrust in the media were the most significant findings. The desk research and interviews revealed a complex ecosystem of GID actors in all three countries, which is discussed in section 4.

3.2 Gender norms and the church

A nuanced understanding of the relative importance of the role of the locally dominant church (Armenian Apostolic, Georgian Orthodox and Polish Catholic) in shaping gender norms is essential for effective programming. In all countries, the majority of respondents identified as belonging to a church. Existing academic literature demonstrates the churches' conservative stance on gender-related issues.[114]

While not taking a unified and outspoken stance on gender issues, individual clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church have been vocal on gender-related topics, largely taking a socially conservative stance. Although the overwhelming majority of our survey respondents (86%) identified as belonging to the church, only 5% of respondents strongly agreed, and a further 15% agreed, that the church should have a say on personal questions such as contraception, abortion or people's sex lives. Furthermore, only 3% of survey respondents stated that their church or faith leaders were their primary influence regarding their views on gender equality.

The Georgian Orthodox Church remains an important actor when it comes to gender relations.[115] The church regained its popularity and importance after the end of Soviet rule; many commentators see this religious revival and de-secularisation as a reaction to forced secularisation and repressing of faith of the previous political regime.[116] The Georgian Orthodox Church is seen as one of the key

players resisting the promotion of LGBT+ rights and resisting the so-called 'gender ideology'. Although an overwhelming majority (86%) of the survey respondents identified as belonging to the Orthodox Church, only 3% agreed that their religious or faith leader shapes their opinion on gender equality. At the same time, 63% of respondents disagreed with the statement that the church has the right to intervene in people's personal decisions. Younger and economically better off people were most likely to disagree; people with a lower level of education and lower economic status were most likely to agree.

Prior to the 2023 elections in Poland, the Catholic Church was highly influential politically and was closely connected to the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* party.[117] Yet, only 1.2% of survey respondents said that the church shapes their opinion on gender equality. Likewise, FGD participants tended to see the influence of the church as waning, and many saw it as having overplayed its hand, as it were, by seeking to dominate political discourse. Participants also pointed to changes in the church, heterogeneity in terms of how people engage with the Catholic Church and differences within the clergy, especially between urban and rural priests, with the latter viewed as being more socially conservative.

Table 1: Attitudes towards locally dominant churches' influence on gender norms and personal decisions

Statement	% strongly agree/ agree in Armenia	% strongly agree/ agree in Georgia	% strongly agree/ agree in Poland
The Church shapes my opinion on gender-related issues	3%	3%	1.2%
The Church has the right to intervene in people's personal decisions on issues such as contraception, abortion or sex life	20%	21%	15.1%

As such, the direct impact of the church and individual clergy on shaping gender norms appears to be limited; however, the responses above obscure, to a degree, the fact that locally dominant churches have over the centuries played a central role in defining gender roles and expectations, and these legacies continue indirectly to shape people's attitudes. Furthermore, the churches influence contemporary politics in all countries through their support for socially conservative political parties and their media presence, as well as foundations and other civic organisations, consistently presenting a conservative or openly 'anti-gender' position.

3.3 Media consumption and trust

Both the survey and FGDs highlighted the lack of trust in the media and the belief that the media further polarises society. In Armenia, 43% of survey respondents stated that they did not trust any media outlets at all on issues of gender equality. Amongst those who did express some trust in the media, the most trusted news sources were the public broadcaster H1 (15%) and Armenia TV (14%), followed by Shant TV with 6%,. This lack of trust was echoed in the FGDs and may partly be a reaction to the coverage of the Nagorny Karabakh war, which some felt was not truthful.[118] These findings are in line with other studies on media usage and trust in Armenia. For example, the 2021-2022 Caucasus Barometer revealed that the three most trusted channels were H 1 (24%), Armenia TV (20%) and Shant TV (16%), with 19% stating that they did not trust any TV station and 8% stating that

they did not watch TV.[119] The Caucasus Barometer revealed that 46% of respondents got their news from television, 32% from social media and 14% from the internet, excluding social media. In terms of social media, 37% stated that they used Facebook and 31% Youtube; 84% of respondents reported using social media as their primary source for news and political information.

Similarly, 45% of Georgian survey respondents reported that they do not trust any television channel when it comes to information on gender equality. This was followed by 22% trusting Imedi, 7% trusting Mtavari and 6% Rustavi 2. Only 1% trusted the Georgian Public Broadcaster Channel 1. The level of distrust in traditional media revealed in the study is much higher in Armenia and Georgia compared with Poland, but is significant in all three countries.

Table 2: Trust in television as source of information on gender equality

Statement	% strongly agree/ agree in Armenia	% strongly agree/ agree in Georgia	% strongly agree/ agree in Poland
I do not trust any of the television channels in relation to information on gender equality	43%	45%	21.6%

In the survey data from Armenia and Georgia, there were no discernible patterns in terms of views held on gender and social norms and the consumption of particular media channels. The only slight correlation in the survey data was that people who used social media more were more likely in general to exhibit more progressive values, although not in terms of gender role expectations.

In the Polish FGDs, both traditional outlets and social media were cited as being influential and contributing to societal divisions. Some participants noted changes in the style of reporting after the 2023 elections, stating that state media had changed its coverage. Some saw it as being more balanced, others as more partisan. In terms of the survey findings, there were clearer distinctions in terms of how views on social norms correlate with the consumption of particular media, as compared to other variables. In particular, this was the case for followers of the public broadcasting channels TVP1, TVP.info and TVP2, which were highly politicised under the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* government, and of the ultra-Catholic outlets Radio Maryia and Telewizja Trwam, and to a slightly lesser extent, NasezMiasto.pl. Table 3 presents the key trends that emerged.

Table 3: Media consumption gender stereotype correlation in Poland

Media consumed	Gender norms and stereotypes of the consumer
TVP1, TVP.info, TVP2, Radio Maryia, Telewizja Trwam, NasezMiasto.pl	• Generally more rightwing and conservative views about gender, sexuality and family • More likely to state that numbers of LGBT+ people have increased in line with growth of western influence on Poland • Support the idea that women have a responsibility to have children in order to sustain the Polish nation • Disapprove of men choosing not to fight for the nation • More likely to send their LGBT+ child for corrective treatment by a psychologist or a priest
Radio Maryia, TVP1	• More likely to agree with the idea that family violence should not be handled by the state
Radio Maryia, TelezizjaTrwam	• Most likely to believe that church has a right to intervene in family violence, as well as in children's sexuality and gender identity

Our analysis shows that there is clear mistrust and disengagement with traditional media and that most respondents tend to get their information from social media. Facebook and YouTube remain the most popular platforms in all three countries, followed by Instagram, TikTok and Telegram. Respondents noted low engagement with X (formerly Twitter) and Russian social media platforms such as *Odnoklassniki* or *Vkontakte*.

The analysis of Armenian and Georgian social media showed that the three most frequently discussed themes among those analysed were LGBT+ rights, women in the public sphere, reproductive rights, and the cluster 'gender, xenophobia, and crime'. Discussions on LGBT+ rights accounted for approximately 39% of posts analysed for both countries, followed by posts about women in public spheres (31% in Georgia and 21% in Armenia), reproductive rights (20% in Armenia and 14% in Georgia), and lastly 'gender, xenophobia, and crime' at 9% and 10% respectively. These were, however, not necessarily GID-related posts; for example, on sexual and reproductive rights, abortion was not a major issue of discussion, whereas medical advice was a more frequent topic of discussion. A spike in social media discussions on LGBT+ issues was also linked in part to the murder of a trans woman in Yerevan, rather than being driven by rights issues.[120] Anti-LGBT+ posts were often either religiously embedded, casting LGBT+ as sinful or immoral, or politically motivated. The latter category included attacks on LGBT+ rights and attempts to discredit opponents by claiming that they are supportive of LGBT+ rights or are themselves gay or lesbian. Posts also linked the Soros Foundation (Open Society Foundations) with supporting LGBT+ rights and cast it as a threat to Armenian traditions.[121]

3.4 Understandings of the term 'gender'

Overall, the surveys and focus groups showed an ambiguous and often partial understanding of the term 'gender' in all three countries, at times shaped by 'anti-gender' GID and deviating from more commonly agreed definitions of the term. The survey revealed that the majority of respondents see gender as binary. In Poland, 62% of the survey participants either agreed or strongly agreed that there are only two genders; 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Georgia and Armenia, these figures are much higher: 95% of respondents agreed with the statement that there are two genders.

Table 4: Binary understandings of gender

Statement: I believe there are only two genders: male and female[122]	% strongly agree/ agree	% disagree/strongly disagree	% don't know/neither agree nor disagree
Armenia	95%	2%	3%
Georgia	95%	3%	2%
Poland	62%	22%	16%

In the FGDs in Armenia and Georgia, many respondents understood the term 'gender' to mean 'equality between women and men'. Others equated gender to biological sex or sexuality. There were few participants who understood gender as socially constructed; these were mainly, but not exclusively, younger people in urban and rural areas. Some participants also expressed a sentiment that 'gender' is a newly created or foreign term. Anxiety around the term 'gender', which may be a direct result of GID around the term, was most clearly visible in the Polish FGDs. Respondents associated the term with sex education for young children, same-sex relationships and trans rights.

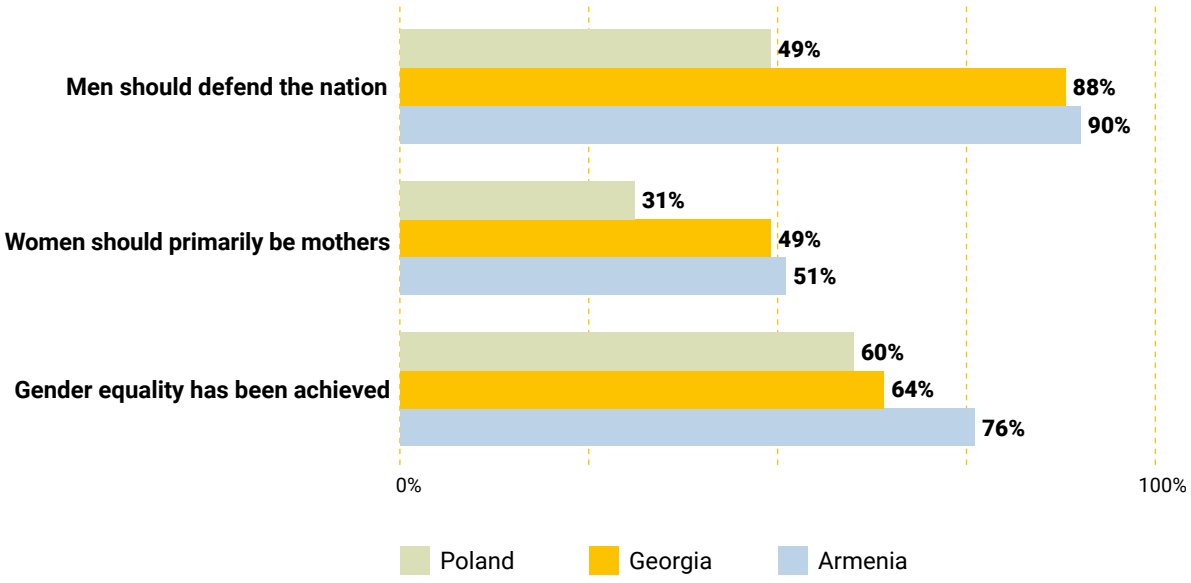
Arguments such as gender being "against nature, against biology"[123] or children being forced to choose from 100 genders or identifying themselves as unicorns were raised. These are globally prevalent GID messages.

3.5 Gendered roles and expectations

The respondents of both the surveys and FGDs were asked about their views on the roles of women and men in Armenian, Georgian and Polish society, respectively; in the FGDs, the division of work in the household was also discussed.

In all three countries, the survey respondents showed high rates – and in Armenia, very high rates – of support for the expectation on men to be defenders of the nation and lower rates of support for the notion that women should primarily be mothers. In parallel with these somewhat stereotypical gender role divisions, there was a prevalent view among the majority in all three countries that gender equality had already been achieved (Figure 1). In Poland, there was a notable gender gap in the responses to this question, with 50.4% of women, compared with 69.6% of men, agreeing or strongly agreeing that women and men already enjoyed equal rights. In Armenia and Georgia, men were more likely to be in favour of more traditional gender roles than women.

Figure 1: Gender roles and gender equality



Participants in the Armenian and Georgian FGDs often linked ideal womanhood to mothering and motherhood, caring for the family, but also being educated and independent, as well as embracing religion and imparting national culture onto the next generation. A number of Armenian FGD respondents, especially men, noted the importance of virginity and the *karmir khndzor* [red apple] ceremony, which celebrates a woman's virginity at marriage.[124] Women's virginity and purity were important to them. Virginity was not discussed by the FGD respondents in Georgia, but the survey results show conservative views on premarital sex. The expert interviewees similarly highlighted that premarital sex and virginity were important in the whole of the Caucasus.

In the Polish FGDs, women were seen as 'multitaskers' who juggle both paid employment and unpaid housework and caring responsibilities; while some celebrated this, there was also critique of women's double burdening. Women were also seen as key to upholding traditions, be this as a result of genuine beliefs in their importance or merely a sense of obligation. A number of older women felt that younger Polish women tend to prioritise a career over having children – "not wanting to bear responsibilities";[125] usually these respondents did not acknowledge the socio-economic pressures that younger generations are under.

In addition to the role of economic provider as being important for men, the Armenian and Georgian FGD respondents often highlighted strength, will power and the ability to protect the family and country as "male characteristics". A man's role as the head of the family was often linked to their role as a protector: men are tasked with protecting their family and country. In Poland, the FGDs focused on perceived generational differences. Female Polish FGD participants, and to a degree older men, tended to highlight a stark difference between older, more 'traditional' men and the younger generation. Older men were mostly depicted as socially conservative, focused on being the breadwinner, seeing themselves as the heads of the family, but not participating in household chores, and spending their free time on hobbies and taking care of their cars. In terms of men from younger generations, i.e. those under the age of 50, women participants tended to see them as more willing to share household duties, without completely abandoning so-called 'traditional' ways of being a man. Younger women particularly tended also to see younger men, especially those under 30, as less willing to work hard, in addition to being more immature than themselves or previous generations.

In a Polish FGD that consisted of younger men living in the capital city Warsaw, respondents complained of women and LGBT+ people having ostensibly more rights and power than men, a discourse strongly resembling that of the global manosphere community. Similar discourses did not come up in the Armenian or Georgian FGDs.

The survey also enquired whether respondents saw domestic violence as a family issue. In Georgia, 49% of respondents believed that violence at home should be resolved without any external intervention; 30% disagreed. In Armenia, 70% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that family violence should be dealt with within the family without intervention by the police or other state institutions, and only 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Poland, however, 68.7% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that violence at home should be resolved without state intervention.

3.6 Traditional values and perception of threat

The concept of traditional values and threats to these are central themes that the populist right and anti-gender alliances often use in their campaigns. There is more anxiety around the threat to traditional family values in Armenia and Georgia, but a very substantial minority of people in Poland also expressed anxiety. LGBT+ activism was seen as a key source of threat across all three countries (see Figures 2 and 3).

In all three countries, men tended to be more likely than women to see the threat as emanating from LGBT+ activists, the EU and other foreign governments, or from women's rights activists. Nonetheless, survey data also pointed to high levels of anxiety in this respect among women and younger respondents in all three countries.

Figure 2: Traditional family values under threat

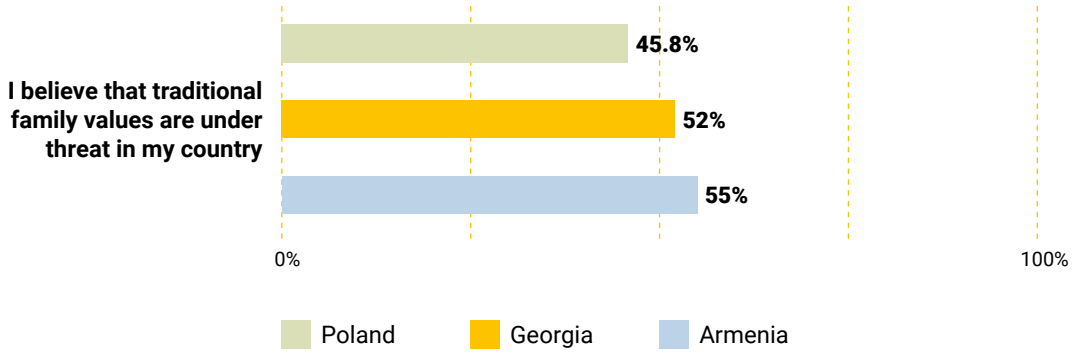
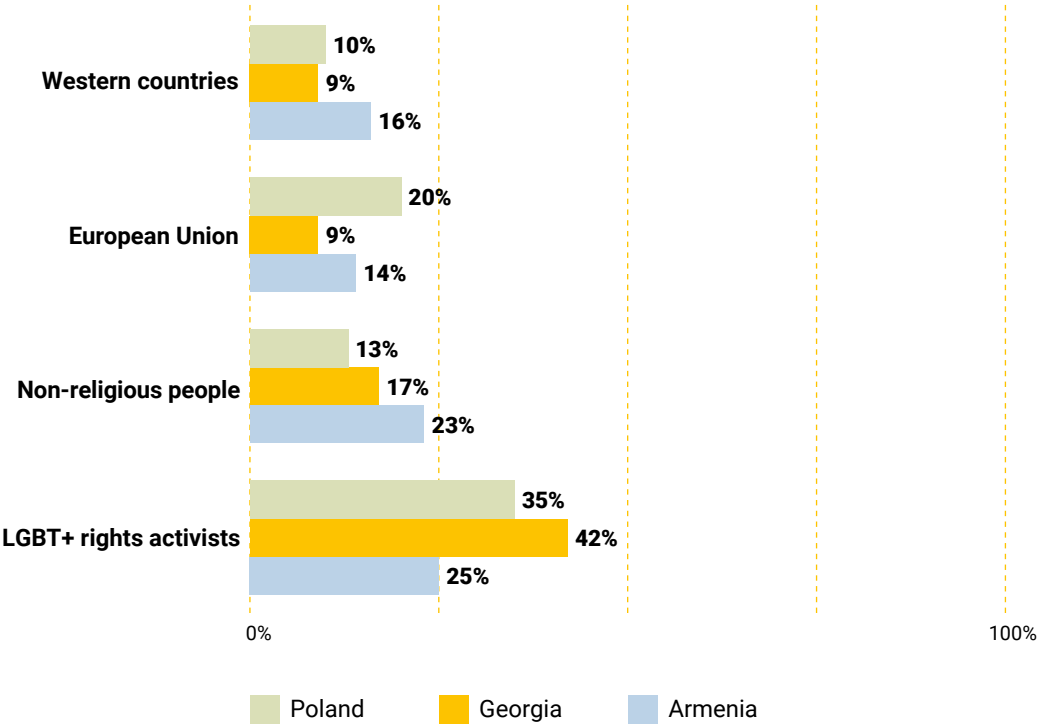


Figure 3: Who is threatening traditional family values in your country?

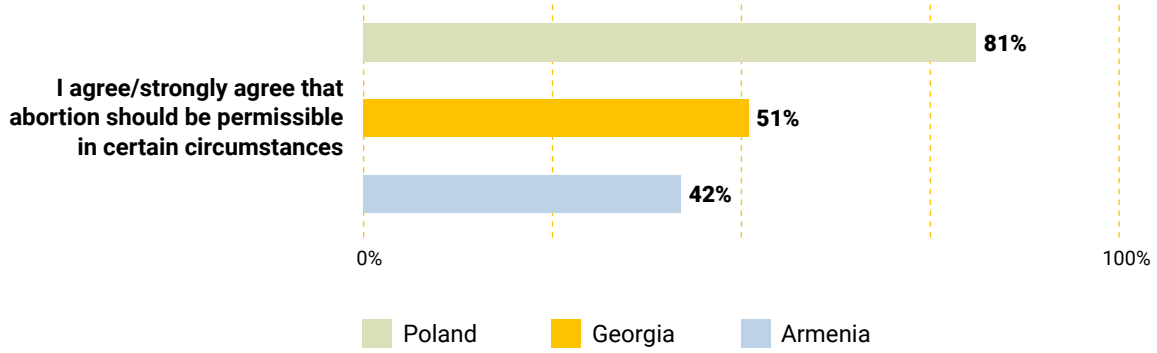


When FGD participants were asked about threats to identity more broadly, gender-related issues and threats to 'traditional family' did not dominate the discussion. Instead, Armenian and Georgian respondents expressed worries about other aspects of their identity – primarily cultural markers such as songs, dances, cuisine and language. In Armenia, the greatest threats to these markers were perceived as: their appropriation by others (such as Azerbaijan or Turkey), people forgetting them, a lack of faith and proselytization by sects, emigration and marriage to non-Armenians. Georgians identified hospitality as one of their key identity markers, but largely did not see this as being threatened. Some people noted that traditions are under threat due to generational changes because younger generations are no longer interested in Georgian cultural traditions. Polish FGD participants noted that the debate on gender has mostly 'died down' now after the ousting of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* government in the 2023 elections – even if the questions around gender still elicited heated debate in the FGDs.

3.7 SRHR and abortion

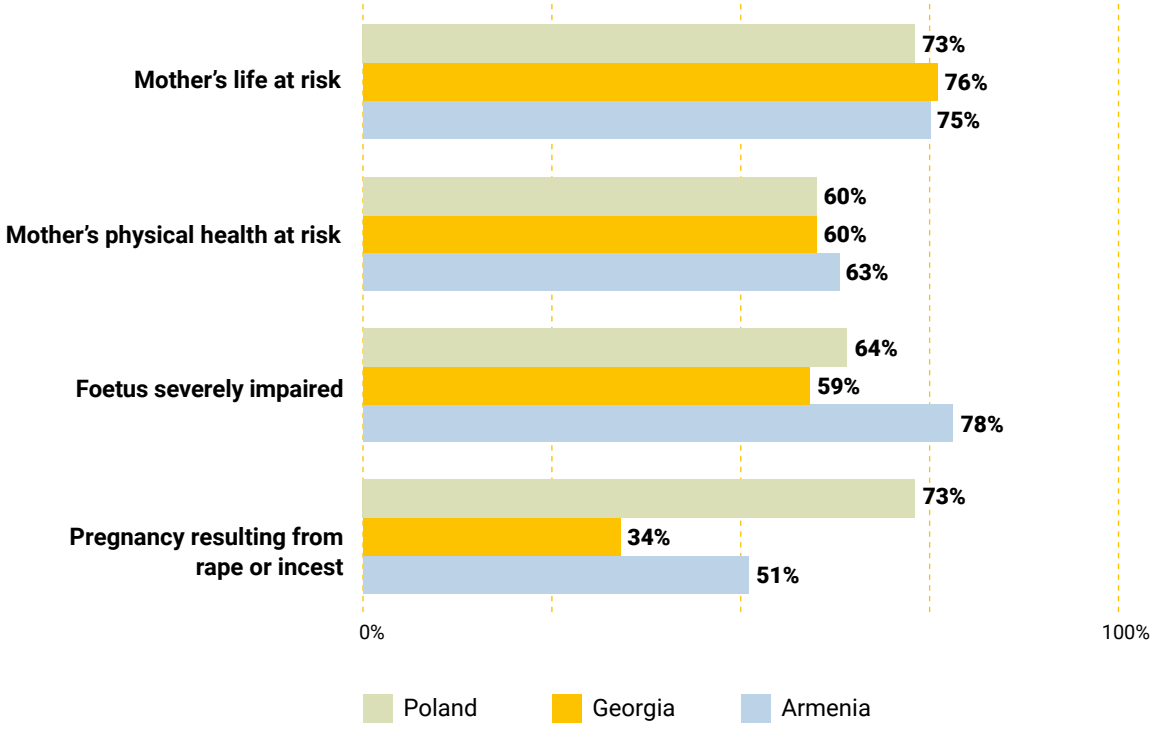
The topic of SRHR, and especially abortion, remains highly politicised and controversial in all three countries. These debates have been very much at the centre of political discourse in Poland over the past decade, but they have been less prominent in Armenia and Georgia. Possibly due to the intense and detailed debates over the issue and its nuances, an overwhelming majority of Polish respondents were in favour of abortion in certain circumstances, while there was greater opposition in principle among respondents in Armenia and Georgia (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Opinions on abortion



The more detailed follow-up questions on whether abortion should be permissible in different circumstances showed greater acceptance in Armenia and Georgia, especially if the mother's or foetus' life is at risk, but acceptance was not so clear in cases of rape and incest (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Circumstances in which abortion should be permissible



Participants in the Armenian and Georgian FGDs showed very strong opposition to abortion despite its prevalence, referring to it as "horrible", "evil", "terrible", "sin", "murder" or "unacceptable". Abortion was also rejected by some participants when the pregnancy resulted from rape. Some respondents in the Armenian and Georgian FGDs raised the issue of sex-selective abortion, which they strongly condemned. There was also a broad consensus that people, especially women, should be more educated on family planning and sexual health.

Similarly, while there were still some disparities among Polish FGD participants on the issue of abortion, all generally accepted that, even if they disapproved of it, abortion should not be banned completely. That women had the right to be the primary decision-maker regarding abortion was also reflected in respondents' attitudes towards who should make decisions about abortion at the national level. There was pushback, especially among women, against (male) political leaders and the church making rulings over sexual and reproductive rights. A common consensus also emerged around contraception being preferable to abortion. Strong differences arose around making emergency contraception available, with some older women especially seeing this as promoting irresponsible, promiscuous sexual behaviour.

Respondents in Polish FGDs reported that the anti-abortion campaigns had left bitter memories. They considered unacceptable the vans with explicit photos of dead foetuses driven through the streets of Polish towns and cities or propaganda shouted through loudspeakers. A particular theme that has been strongly present in the Polish SRHR debate has been the so-called 'post-abortion syndrome', which has been widely spread by Catholic news sites such as Radio Maryja, Polonia Christiana, Oto Idę and Rodzina Bogiem Silna.[126] These narratives promote the idea that abortion inevitably has negative psychological consequences for women; it has been used extensively by pro-life activists to oppose abortion, but is generally not recognised by most physicians.[127]

3.7 Diverse SOGIESC rights

The issue of diverse SOGIESC rights and the visibility of LGBT+ identities has been a major societal and political debate in all three countries, which was reflected in the social media analysis, surveys and FGDs, as well as raised frequently in the expert interviews. The data shows prevailing heteronormative attitudes across the three countries, albeit much stronger in Armenia and Georgia than Poland. Yet, there was a degree of passive-aggressive tolerance of LGBT+ people, provided that they did not 'impose' themselves on the rest of the society and did not educate or raise children. This latter point highlights the degree to which GID narratives of LGBT+ people are a threat to children have been successful. In both Armenia and Georgia, only 9% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people of diverse SOGIESC should be allowed to have or adopt children. In Armenia 6%, and in Georgia 10%, would approve of their children being looked after or taught by someone who was openly LGBT+. In Poland, there was noticeably less opposition, with 33% of respondents in support of LGBT+ people having or adopting children, although this was still a minority view. A slight majority of 51.9% (of whom 61.4% were women and 41.6% men) agreed or strongly agreed that they had no issue with their child being taught by an LGBT+ teacher. Despite these prevalent negative attitudes, in all three contexts, respondents showed far more tolerance when they were asked how they would react to their child coming out as LGBT+ (see Table 5).

Table 5: Views on LGBT+ rights in relation to own child

Statement: I would…	% strongly agree/ agree in Armenia	% strongly agree/ agree in Georgia	% strongly agree/ agree in Poland
…ask my son or daughter to keep it a secret if I found out they were gay, lesbian or transgender	18%	28%	16%
…approve of my children being looked after or taught by someone who is gay, lesbian or transgender	5%	10%	51%
…approve of gay, lesbian or transgender couples holding hands or embracing in public	8%	5%	41%

The FGDs revealed a wide range of views. In Armenia, male participants in particular often expressed strong and explicitly negative attitudes, advocating for violent and discriminatory actions such as burning, beating and exile from Armenia. One woman participant even cited the presence of LGBT+ individuals in Yerevan as a reason for returning to her region of origin. People of diverse SOGIESC rights were viewed as "diseased" and compared to substance abusers, and seen as a threat to children. Some respondents stressed the gender binary as having Christian and Armenian roots and non-binary identities as being western imports and a threat to the nation. Yet, there was a minority of voices that pushed back against the prevalent anti-LGBT+ sentiments and highlighted the existing negative propaganda against diverse SOGIESC people, as well as the fact that LGBT+ persons have always existed in society.

In Georgia, a majority of the FGD participants started their comments on LGBT+ people by stating that they believe such people should have the same rights as everyone else; however, there was a widespread sentiment that LGBT+ people should not express their identity in public spaces. There was also a lot of blame put on LGBT+ persons themselves for the violence that is perpetrated against them. Some participants expressed explicitly anti-LGBT+ sentiments, combined with concern for children's safety; a minority of participants linked LGBT+ people to Satanism. As in Armenia, some participants, mostly women and younger urban men, stated that LGBT+ people are discriminated against. For Georgia, the social media analysis highlighted the degree to which 'LGBT propaganda' was discussed online as a threat, but also that anti-diverse SOGIESC rights discourses resonate in western societies as well:

> *"[T]he term 'LGBT propaganda' was a significant subject that appeared in posts on the topic. In this context, the necessity of protecting the future generation – children – was usually emphasised most often. There was a connection mentioned in a few posts between non-governmental organisations supported by western countries and 'LGBTQ propaganda' in Georgia. The authors of one such post claimed that the LGBT+ community deliberately plans provocations in order to obtain large financial support from western nations. Based on this belief, several posts were about the protests of parents in Canada and the US [United States] against 'LGBTQ propaganda'. One such post featured a video of a parent walking into a classroom at a US school and pulling an LGBT+ flag off the wall. The purpose of the post was to show two things: first, that LGBT+ 'propaganda' is carried out in schools in the US, and second, parents do not support LGBT+ 'propaganda' in schools and fight against it."*[128]

The issue of diverse SOGIESC rights also provoked a wide range of responses in the Polish FGDs, from full acceptance or a more limited tolerance to outright disapproval. Usually, the limited tolerance was conditional upon LGBT+ persons not being "too open" about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, or actively petitioning for more rights. Younger women and older urban women were more likely to be open to diverse SOGIESC rights in the FGDs. In contrast, focus groups composed of older women from smaller towns and rural areas, as well as of younger and older men, tended to be less receptive towards diverse SOGIESC rights. Pride parades were often raised in the FGDs. Among respondents who were less tolerant towards diverse SOGIESC rights, Pride parades were seen as an "imposition", especially among older respondents. The parades were seen to contrast with the behaviour of what they saw as "good" gays and lesbians who did not display their sexual orientation publicly.

The issue of whether LGBT+ couples should be allowed to adopt children raised concerns among many Polish FGD participants, even those who were otherwise open to diverse SOGIESC rights. A large number of respondents were openly opposed to the idea. Many, however, also countered that a loving non-heterosexual couple would make for better parents than a non-loving heterosexual couple, and that it was preferable to an orphanage. While the issue of child adoption by LGBT+ couples generated predominantly negative reactions, the question around teachers of diverse SOGIESC was less controversial. Here again, though, many respondents stressed that teachers' diverse sexual orientation and gender identity should not be publicly or "brazenly" displayed and that they should not "indoctrinate" children.

While many Polish FGD participants, especially older people, displayed limited tolerance towards LGBT+ people, others, usually urban women, were incensed by this limited acceptance and by the anti-LGBT+ propaganda of the previous government. Respondents recollected the 'LGBT-free zones' and the government's attempts to make people believe that homosexuals are paedophiles.

4. Findings related to GID actors

In terms of the main GID actors, the research found that all three countries have, to differing degrees, local 'GID ecosystems' and networks including:

- individual activists, influencers, and social/traditional media people;
- established socially conservative, often but not exclusively centre-right parties;
- far-right extremist and ultra-nationalist parties and groups;
- media outlets (ranging from mainstream to fringe media);
- foundations;
- think tanks;
- issue-based pressure groups; and
- faith-based actors, including active members of the mainstream churches, as well as members of more extreme factions within these.

The table below gives a brief overview of the main actors in the three countries.

Table 6: Examples of Identified GID Actors in Armenia, Georgia, and Poland

Type of actor	Examples from Armenia	Examples from Georgia	Examples from Poland
Individual activist/ influencer	Arman Boshyan, Narek Malyan, Mika Badalyan, Hayk Nazaryan	Levan Vasadze, Sandro Bregadze, Lado Sadgobelashvili	Kaja Godek, Magdalena Korzekwa-Kaliszuk
Established socially conservative political parties	Republican Party of Armenia	Georgian Dream	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Konfederacja
Far-right extremist and ultra-nationalist parties and groups	Adekvad, Hosank	Georgian March	Młodzież Wszechpolska, Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, Falanga
Media outlets		Alt-Info, Georgia and World, Sezoni TV	Telewizja Republika, Fronda.pl, Niezalezna.pl, Red Pill Poland
Foundations			Fundacja Instytut na rzecz Kultury Prawnej Ordo Iuris, Fundacja Lux Veritatis, Fundacja Pro-Prawo do Życia
Think tanks	Yerevan Geopolitical Club, Luys Information and Analytical Center		Logos Institute and Association for Christian Culture, Fidei Defensor
Issue-based pressure groups	Kamq Armenia, Pan-Armenian Parental Committee (now inactive), Stop G7, For Restoration and Sovereignty, Stop Gender Initiative		Men's Rights Polska – Prawa Mężczyzn, Życie i Rodzina
Faith-based actors	Armenian Apostolic Church	Georgian Orthodox Church	Roman Catholic Church, Catholic think tanks and foundations

The various GID actors do not fully share political and societal goals, but often coalesce around certain topics or issues, amplifying these before drifting apart again. The actors and platforms they use also change frequently. The interplay between the more and less extreme actors, whether intentional or not, allows for a more radical shifting of the 'Overton window'[129] on gender issues, further than less extreme actors could achieve on their own, while allowing them to be the 'more reasonable' players.

GID actors are often internationally networked. The role of links to the Russian government and Russian Orthodox Church are greater in this respect in Armenia and Georgia, although some Polish actors such as Ordo Luris also have been shown to have received financing from Russia. The Russian GID ecosystem is not the only actor, however, and is itself also linked more broadly to central and western European, as well as North American, GID actors. In Poland, GID links to non-Russian actors are in part mediated through the Catholic Church and affiliated organisations. This international networking allows for a rapid circulation of messages and approaches that are proving successful in other contexts, and which can then be adapted to the local context.

In addition to the established actors above, there are also amorphous and rapidly changing networks or temporary spaces in which GID is produced, discussed, disseminated and amplified, and in which the actors above and others engage, such as Reddit, 4chan and 8chan message boards, or Telegram and WhatsApp discussion groups. Increasingly, various offline and online spaces are also being used for the dissemination of GID and reaching new audiences, such as gyms, sports clubs, online gaming platforms, or wellness and interior design discussion forums.

5. Discussion of impact and implication of findings

Armenia, Georgia, and Poland all displayed considerable polarisation of political debate around gender issues, including a deliberate politicisation of the term 'gender' itself. GID actors have been prominent in public debate in all three countries, including on social and traditional media. These actors include political parties and state actors; the respective churches, be it institutionally and/or through individual clergy; think tanks and foundations; and social movements. In all the contexts, however, a significant part of the population sees GID as not emanating from these actors, but rather from those advocating for gender equality and women's and diverse SOGIESC rights, as well as from western institutions such as the EU. In all the contexts, there was a lot of distrust in the media, very high levels of broader political polarisation, resistance to being told what to think and high engagement with social media channels, but often in 'echo chambers'.

In all three countries, there is a common perception that attitudes on gender issues are divided along age, class, education, and geographical lines, whereby older, poorer, less educated, and more rural populations are more socially conservative. The qualitative and quantitative findings from all three contexts caution against such simplified analyses. The fault lines on gender norms – especially but not only in Poland – may run through these demographic divisions as much as, if not more than, between them. Sex tends to be a more consistent predictor, with men in all three contexts generally being less progressive than women, although again this should not be taken as a given for all issues, and findings were in part contradictory (e.g. women being more progressive on some issues than men and less on others). The relatively high degree of social conservatism among younger respondents was notable in all three contexts. Although there was only one FGD with younger urban men in Poland, and thus we cannot draw definitive conclusions from it, the anti-gender equality sentiments raised by these participants were reflective of other research that points to an increasing gap between young men and women when it comes to gender norms.

5.1 Ambiguous, partial and binary understanding of the term 'gender'

In Armenia, Georgia and Poland, there was widespread recognition but often partial understanding of the term 'gender', reflecting in part its co-optation and wilful misuse by anti-gender equality actors.

Respondents often understood gender to be the same as gender equality, in which case they were mostly positive about it; equated gender with biological sex and sexuality; or related it, in a negative sense, to diverse SOGIESC and threats to traditional family values. Some Polish FGD participants noted the deliberate misuse of the term gender by the previous *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* government. In Poland especially, there was a sense that the debate around the term was no longer topical and had died down. In all three countries, a binary understanding of gender prevailed.

When participants linked gender to biological sex or sexuality, some more negative connotations came to the fore, particularly in the FGDs. There was anxiety around the sexual education of children, as well as some transphobic remarks in Poland. There were also sentiments that 'gender' had been imported from abroad and that in the West there are now "50 genders" (Armenia and Georgia) or "over 100 genders" (Poland), echoing common disinformation tropes that have also often surfaced in Russian and western 'anti-gender' propaganda (see also below on diffusion of messages and GID talking points). Among younger Polish men in one of the FGDs, there were clear echoes of anti-feminist, 'red pill' talking points, which circulate in the so-called 'manosphere' online.

5.2 'Traditional' femininities and masculinities

In all three contexts, FGD participants' responses to discussions around the concept of an 'ideal' (and in the Polish case, 'typical') woman or man revealed high levels of gender conservatism. Femininity was most closely linked to motherhood and mothering. In Armenia, some FGD participants openly linked motherhood to the survival of the nation. In all countries, however, there was also an expectation that women be both mothers and work outside the home – although not to the degree of prioritising career over family.

Ideal/typical men were seen as breadwinners and protectors in all three countries. The importance of employment was also highlighted. Georgians noted that it is important for men to be caring and refrain from violence and losing their temper, while Armenians strongly linked masculinity with protection of the nation. In Poland, especially for men under 50, participation in household chores was a given, less so in Armenia and Georgia. Across the board in all three contexts, men's attitudes tended to be less gender equitable and more anti-LGBT+ than those of women, especially younger women.

The belief that gender equality already exists was relatively widespread in the three countries; this was not seen as incompatible with binary roles and stereotypes. An exception to this, however, were younger women in Poland, who were vocal about the lack of gender equality. The majority of respondents are able to hold the contrasting beliefs that women and men are equal and that no more gender equality interventions are needed, while arguing that women should prioritise motherhood and care and men must remain breadwinners and defenders of the nation. This acceptance of gender equality could be a useful entry point to programmes and campaigns, but also means that further demands may be seen by a majority as 'unnecessary' or 'too radical', requiring contextualised sensitisation and careful messaging. Programming needs to take into account that the terms 'gender' and 'feminism' are widely (and in part wilfully) misunderstood and politically highly charged, in a negative sense.

5.3 Diverse SOGIESC rights

FGD and survey responses on LGBT+ rights ranged from full acceptance, to varying degrees of tolerance, to outright rejection in all three contexts and across all of the data collection methods. The findings confirm that there are very high levels of bi-, homo-, lesbo- and transphobia in all three contexts, although it is worth noting that there were people willing to speak out in defence of LGBT+ rights in almost all settings.

Although some extremely vehement views were expressed, including violent intent, especially in Armenia and Georgia, the most dominant attitude in all three contexts was one of heteronormative, but begrudging tolerance. This was most obvious from the FGDs. People of diverse SOGIESC were tolerated under the condition that they were not 'too open' about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Similarly, many respondents were uncomfortable with gay or trans couples embracing in public. Public demonstrations for diverse SOGIESC rights often provoked strongly antagonistic reactions, and in all three countries many FGD participants saw this as an 'imposition' of LGBT+ identities. Limited tolerance of diverse SOGIESC was, therefore, made contingent upon quiescence.

The research showed high levels of anxiety around LGBT+ people and their impact on children's development and safety, possibly fuelled by mis- and disinformation linking diverse SOGIESC to paedophilia. The greatest resistance of Armenians, Georgians and Poles was to the idea of people of diverse SOGIESC adopting or having children. LGBT+ people teaching children was more tolerated, but again with caveats. These attitudes did not necessarily translate into negative reactions to the hypothetical scenario of the respondents' own child coming out as LGBT+, which may offer some entry points for programming.

The majority of respondents who displayed overtly anti-LGBT+ sentiments were older men – and to a degree older women – from rural areas, but even within these demographics there were individuals who stood up for SOGEISC rights. Being LGBT+ was often framed as a position/identity incompatible with traditional values. In Armenia especially, it was perceived as a disease and some respondents compared it to drug use. The rejection of diverse SOGEISC was only seldom cast in religious terms.

Finally, in all three contexts, there was a sizable segment of respondents who saw LGBT+ persons and advocates for their rights as a primary threat to traditional family values, and who felt that increased western influence had led to an increase in the number of persons of diverse SOGIESC. This indicates both the influence of GID narratives and presents a potential challenge for programming on these issues.

5.4 SRHR

Abortion was identified throughout the expert interviews as a key issue dominating public debate on gender in all three contexts and it led to strong reactions in the FGDs, less so in the surveys. In Armenia and Georgia, discourse referring to abortion as 'sin' and 'murder' was pervasive in discussions and revealed widespread stigma around the topic, despite it being relatively common in practice. Abortion was generally only deemed acceptable where the pregnancy poses a threat to the mother's life, but there were only limited calls for a complete ban. In both Armenia and Georgia, sex-

selective abortion was mentioned in the FGDs and strongly condemned. The survey results, however, were not as strongly anti-abortion in both Armenia and Georgia. The topic of surrogacy was present in the social media analysis conducted in Georgia, but not in Armenia.

In Poland, where abortion has been an urgent contemporary political topic for years, the FGD participants described an over-exposure to messaging on the issue. At the same time, most respondents in the FGDs concurred that, independent of whether they personally disagreed with the practice, access to abortion in Poland should not be completely banned. This was corroborated by the survey, which showed only a small minority of 9.4% in support of a complete prohibition. A debate has, however, emerged around the issue of emergency contraception, also known as the 'morning after pill', which has partially re-ignited the previous abortion debate.

In all contexts, the consensus was that pregnant people should be the main decision-makers with regards to reproductive rights and health. This opinion was most pronounced in Poland, where there was a pushback, particularly in the FGDs, against priests or politicians deciding, and mixed opinions on the father's role in the decision. In Georgia and Armenia, wider family and doctors were noted as relevant people to inform such a decision. In both contexts, neither priests nor politicians were seen as actors who should be centrally involved in these decisions, even if this was not voiced in such strong terms as in Poland.

5.5 Threats to the nation and family

In the surveys conducted in Armenia and Georgia, over 50% of participants agreed that traditional family values were under threat, whereas in Poland it was 45%. Respondents tended to identify LGBT+ people as the main source of that threat, followed in Armenia and Georgia by non-religious people, and in Poland by outside forces, especially the EU. The perceived erosion of traditional family values was, however, much less of an issue in the FGDs. In Poland, it was not directly voiced by these respondents. In Armenia and Georgia, although threats to family values were not explicitly articulated, respondents communicated a degree of anxiety around threats to their culture in relation to the loss of traditional dances, music or cuisine, due to emigration and other factors.

5.6 Gender norms and GID ecosystems

The prevailing gender norms and gendered attitudes in the three contexts have in part already been shaped by GID messaging – for example, in terms of hateful attitudes towards LGBT+ people or wilful misrepresentation of the term gender – but also provide a fertile environment for further mis- and disinformation. In all three countries, the research identified diverse, dynamic and well-networked GID 'ecosystems'. In Armenia and Georgia, the links between these ecosystems and Russian GID actors are stronger than in Poland, but in all three countries there are also connections elsewhere, such as to central and western European and North American GID actors. The latter is especially true for male supremacist and anti-feminist messaging, similarities to which were found among young Polish male respondents in an FGD. Although the GID messaging is always localised, there is a circulation of similar messages globally and regionally, such as around alleged threats to children from LGBT+ people, or the alleged existence of a perfidious 'gender ideology' that is threatening the family and nation. As elsewhere, GID ecosystems are amorphous and dynamic and, although

they are ideologically diverse, they often temporarily coalesce around key messages and issues. Gender-related disinformation also crosses over into other forms of disinformation, such as medical or xenophobic.

6. Recommendations

The following set of recommendations are for international and national NGOs working on gender equality and peacebuilding, donors and funders supporting gender-related programmes, government agencies and policy-makers, and researchers and analysts studying gender norms and the impact of anti-gender movements.

- **Consider the complex geopolitical situation in the three countries when designing gender-related programming.** This should include the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and Georgian conflict contexts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the effects of the Russian war in Ukraine, and relations with the EU or Russian Federation. In addition, the domestic political situation, current tensions and demographic divisions require locally owned and managed action.

- **Use research to better understand how and why GID resonates with a given audience.** Understanding dominant gender norms, expectations and narratives around these is central to understanding how and why different groups and individuals are susceptible to GID, and thus also to countering this messaging. It is important not simply to assume that particular demographics are more susceptible than others; the emerging picture from this research is more complicated.

- **Calibrate programming to target audiences based on granular research.** Any work that challenges gender stereotypes needs to be heavily contextualised and focused on the particular attitudes of the target audience and the specific aims of the programming. For messaging to be effective, it is key that it is conducted via a medium that reaches the selected audience(s) and is transmitted in a format that resonates with them. This may require using different formats and messages for different audiences. The research suggests that social media is the key medium used and trusted by most Armenians, Georgians and Poles. The research uncovered a relative unwillingness among Poles to step outside their 'echo chamber' and challenge others or be challenged on their own views. Programming should also consider face-to-face engagement.

- **Be aware of misunderstanding misappropriations of the term 'gender' and of anti-LGBT+ sentiments.** It is key that any programming mitigates the risks of being challenged by anti-gender forces or being misunderstood/misconstrued. Any work that focuses on gender equality in Armenia, Georgia and Poland will have to consider two key challenges: first, it is likely to be opposed by a significant proportion of the population that thinks gender equality has already been achieved and that this work undermines the local culture and traditions; and second, that this work is an extension of unwanted foreign influence. Importantly, there is also the confusion around the term 'gender' itself. There is likely to be even more resistance to any work focusing on LGBT+ rights. Local ownership and locally-crafted messaging are essential to avoiding any counter-GID work being seen as 'outside interference'.

- **Be aware of the risks and resistance that programming will likely face and employ mitigating strategies.** These risks are very visible in the current political and regional security situation. Be it the political flux in Armenia in the aftermath of the fall of Nagorny Karabakh, Georgian Dream's openly anti-gender stance and policies, or the politicisation of reproductive rights and LGBT+ issues in Poland, gender issues may be mobilised by nationalist groups to a greater degree than to date, necessitating a programming approach that is flexible and where decision-making is localised to allow for quick reactions as necessary.

- **Ensure the safety of all involved in programming.** GID ecosystems are gaining strength in all three countries. It is therefore likely that any gender-related programming in all three countries will be challenged by GID networks. The current Armenian and Polish governments promote aspects of gender equality in their legislation, but in Georgia, the relatively recent Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, combined with anti-LGBT+ laws and attitudes, could lead to safety risks for everyone involved in programming. Take all possible safety measures when designing programming.

- **Make conflict sensitivity central to programming.** The continued militarised existential threat produces high levels of anxiety among the populations studied, but especially Armenians. As militarisation perseveres, it is important to ensure that gender equality and LGBT+ rights are represented as key to national unity and resilience. Many respondents may think they do not know anyone who is LGBT+; therefore, thinking about the ways in which people who would not normally engage with one another could meet and share their life stories or experiences in a safe space could be an efficient way of overcoming societal divides.

- **Utilise historical entry points where possible, in a conflict-sensitive manner.** Armenians, Georgians and Poles are often very proud of their history and traditions. As such, historical entry points that highlight equality and women's empowerment may be useful with some target audiences. At the same time, it is key to challenge effectively the idea that gender inequality has been eradicated or that 'gender' is a foreign concept not applicable in local contexts.

- **Impact of the manosphere narratives requires further research.** Although the evidence for this is limited to one focus group in the Polish capital, some young Polish men reported grievances about women and minorities having more rights than them and feminism going 'too far'. There is evidence of engagement with the global 'manosphere' and 'Incel' ideology. This is an important and potentially very threatening phenomenon that should be addressed. It is worth considering programming tailored towards men who feel this grievance and anxiety, but more research on how widespread this sentiment is among Polish men is needed.

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