

Disinformation and division:

Assessing gender norms in Armenia, Georgia and Poland

SUMMARY

Key findings

- An understanding of gender norms, and the actors influencing these norms, is key to programming because gender and identity disinformation draws on and seeks to influence pre-existing gender norms.
- Understanding of the term 'gender' is limited and ambiguous in Armenia, Georgia and Poland.
- The majority of respondents believed that gender equality had already been achieved in their country, while maintaining binary and differential expectations of the roles of women and men in society.
- The respective locally dominant church plays an important role in Armenia, Georgia and Poland, although respondents denied its influence over gender-related matters.
- Reproductive rights and access to abortion are politicised and contentious in all three countries.
- Homophobia and transphobia are pervasive in Armenia and Georgia and present to a lesser extent in Poland.
- Significant anxiety around the survival of the nation and traditional values, particularly in Armenia and Georgia, shapes attitudes to gender norms and exacerbates anti-LGBT+ sentiments.

Introduction

- This study was commissioned to examine dominant gender norms and gender-related public debates in Armenia, Georgia and Poland to inform a better understanding of gender and identity disinformation (GID) in these contexts.
- Various national and international actors use GID to target individuals based on their gender and sexual orientation. GID aims to discredit, intimidate and silence high-profile women and gender-diverse and LGBT+ individuals, including politicians, activists and journalists, undermining democratic participation and processes, threatening individual rights and weakening social cohesion.

- GID exploits deeply held societal biases about gender and sexuality, targeting those who are vulnerable to violence and abuse due to existing discrimination. GID is multifaceted and simultaneously undermines human rights, democratic values and, in turn, national security through an escalating pattern of harm, from targeted harassment to systemic instability.

Methodology

The research was conducted between April 2023 and March 2024 in Armenia, Georgia and Poland, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including:

- 16 interviews with experts across the three countries and the region in mid-2023 and early 2024, including thematic experts, academics and civil society actors;
- a quantitative phone-based survey in December 2023 of a demographically representative sample of 1,200 Armenians, 1,400 Georgians and 1,200 Poles;
- 26 focus groups across the three countries in January and February 2024, with participants from urban and rural areas of different ages and genders to capture different views in greater qualitative depth;
- a literature review; and
- a social media analysis examining Armenian, Georgian and Polish Facebook posts from late 2021 to late 2023 with a focus on gender-related terms.

Country contexts

- Despite the different historical, social, political and economic histories of Armenia, Georgia and Poland, there are a number of commonalities between the countries.
- The cultural histories of the three countries are all closely connected to the church – Apostolic, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, respectively.
- All three countries have endured centuries of foreign domination and mass violence against the civilian population by the occupying powers, prompting gendered expectations, including that women have a responsibility to bear children to ensure the survival of the nation.
- Decades of state socialism and the turbulent transition period thereafter have impacted on all three countries, shaping current gender relations and norms.
- During the socialist era, women enjoyed greater socio-economic equality and more rights than women in the West; however, there was widespread persecution and lack of awareness of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and other gender identity (LGBT+) individuals.
- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in their newfound independence, the three countries turned away from policies associated with the state socialist era, including those related to gender equality, returning to a more conservative outlook and ‘traditional’ male domination.

Armenia

- The legacy of the traumatic events in the Ottoman Empire during World War I (recognised by many countries as genocide) and current conflict are promoting strong nationalist sentiments.
- After the break up of the Soviet Union and the restitution of Armenian independence, there was a movement to reject gender equality, led by nationalist political parties and the church.

- The term 'gender' has been highly politicised since 2013 following the introduction of a law on gender equality. Feminists and women peacebuilders are frequently targeted.
- 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 all prominent topics of debate, with GID actors exacerbating tendencies towards homophobia, transphobia and pro-natalist sentiments to counter the perceived threat to 'Armenian values'.

Georgia

- Societal levels of homophobia and transphobia in Georgia remain high.
- Restrictions on foreign-funded organisations imposed by legislation passed in January 2025 threaten to stifle civil society and force non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to move abroad.
- The legislation also led to the suspension of Georgia's accession to the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) imposing sanctions on Georgian Dream politicians.
- Georgia recently introduced new rules complicating access to abortion and the ruling Georgian Dream party proposed anti-LGBT+ legislation, reiterating the existing ban on same-sex marriage, prohibiting adoption by LGBT+ people and targeting transgender people's rights.
- The Georgian parliament has also recently removed electoral quotas for women.

Poland

- Gender issues have become politicised and GID has been pervasive over the past 15 years, especially on issues relating to SOGIESC and SRHR, in particular abortion.
- Between 2015 and 2023, 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 staunchly conservative social policies, including in relation to abortion.
- To counter the widespread dissemination of GID, civil society is actively working to counter it and promote women's and diverse SOGIESC rights.
- Donald Tusk's government, in power since late 2023, promised to liberalise abortion, but internal political opposition was obstructing this at the time of writing. Access to emergency contraception is proving contentious and the government's bill to allow over-the-counter access was vetoed by the president.

Key findings relating to gender norms

- The majority of respondents identified as belonging to the dominant local church (Armenian Apostolic Church, Georgian Orthodox Church, or Polish Catholic Church), but most respondents across all three countries did not see the church as influencing their perception of gender-related issues.
- There is clear mistrust and disengagement with traditional media in the three countries and most respondents reported getting most of their information from social media. The social media analysis highlighted that LGBT+ rights, women's rights and reproductive rights were the most prevalent topics explored on social media.
- There is an ambiguous and often partial understanding of the term 'gender' in all three countries and at times this is 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. The majority of respondents saw gender as binary.

- In all three countries, a majority of respondents believed that gender equality has already been achieved, although this was more contested in Poland with significantly more men than women subscribing to this view. In some cases, this perception has resulted in 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.
- Gender conservatism dominates in Armenia and Georgia with gender relations defined by traditional gender roles and expectations, combined with economic and geopolitical pressures. Women are first and foremost mothers, although still expected to work, and men are the breadwinners and defenders of the nation. Such beliefs also persist in Poland, but gender roles are also seen as undergoing a generational shift.
- Reproductive rights are controversial and highly politicised in all three countries, e.g. in relation to the role of women as procreators to ensure survival of the nation in Armenia or in debates around access to abortion and emergency contraception in Poland. Disapproval of abortion was pronounced in Armenia and Georgia, despite the notably high rates of abortion in those countries. An overwhelming majority of Polish respondents were in favour of abortion in certain circumstances.
- The data shows prevailing heteronormative attitudes across the three countries, albeit much stronger in Armenia and Georgia than Poland. Attitudes towards people of diverse SOGIESC having or adopting children, and being teachers or providing childcare, were predominantly negative across all three countries, but there was significantly greater tolerance in Poland.
- There is anxiety around the survival of the nation and traditional values in all three countries, but particularly in Armenia and Georgia. A substantial minority of Poles believe traditional values are under threat. 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 women's rights activists.

GID ecosystems

- Local, internationally-networked 'GID ecosystems' have taken root in Armenia, Georgia and Poland, including activists and influencers; established socially conservative parties (usually centre right); far-right extremist and ultra-nationalist parties and groups; media outlets (mainstream to fringe); foundations; think tanks; pressure groups; and faith-based actors, including active members of the mainstream churches.
- The direct impact of the church and individual clergy on shaping gender norms appears to be limited, but the centuries-long association between national identity and the respective dominant church and their continued social and political roles make them influential actors.
- GID often overlaps with other forms of disinformation (e.g. anti-vaccine or xenophobic).
- GID actors are using online and offline spaces to engage with their audiences. The platforms they use, and the actors themselves, change frequently.
- In Poland, the increased influence of male supremacist and anti-gender equality views was evident among young men.
- The various GID actors often have different political and/or societal objectives, but they often coalesce around certain topics or issues. The interplay between more and less extreme actors amplifies mainstream views on gender issues.

Recommendations

Any gender-related programming should take into consideration the complex geopolitical situation in the three countries. It should include, depending on the context, the situation in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and Georgian conflict contexts, the effects of Russian war in Ukraine, relations with major geopolitical actors (e.g. the EU, US and Russian Federation), domestic political situations, current tensions and demographic divisions. All programme designs require locally owned and managed action.

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 geopolitical and domestic political situation when designing gender-related programming.
- Conduct research to better understand how and why GID resonates with a given audience, including understanding dominant gender norms, expectations and narratives around these. Do not simply assume that particular demographics are more susceptible than others; the 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 target audience and the specific aims of the programming.
- 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 misconstrued. Local ownership and locally-crafted messaging are essential to avoiding impressions of 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. Gender issues may be mobilised by nationalist groups to a greater degree than to date, so programming must be flexible with local decision-making to enable quick reactions.
- Ensure the safety of all those involved through careful programme design. 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.
- Make conflict sensitivity central to programming. As militarisation perseveres, it is key to ensure that gender equality and LGBT+ rights are represented as key to national unity.
- Utilise historical entry points where possible, in a conflict-sensitive manner.
- Conduct further research into the growing impact of the manosphere.¹

¹ The manosphere is a network of online communities, blogs, forums and social media spaces focused on anti-feminist viewpoints. It typically promotes masculinity, misogyny and anti-gender diverse voices.

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