

New Research on Masculinity in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova

This publication is a summary of national studies that were conducted as part of the REDEFINE programme, a regional effort to engage men in gender equality and to encourage them to stand against violence across Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus region. The studies were conducted by Georgian women's rights organization Sapari, Armenian organisations Armenian Progressive Youth NGO and Sexual Assault Crisis Center, Casa Marioarei from Moldova as well as a Belarusian organisation working in exile, which needs to remain anonymous for safety reasons. The publication was made possible with support from Sida, the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency.



Introduction

The concept of masculinity and what it means “to be a man” is often constricting and contradictory. Findings from five studies conducted in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus region suggest that young men are highly aware of gender stereotypes and societal expectations, and many struggle to relate to these norms. A new generation of men are negotiating their relationship with masculinity, and this is leading to changes in attitudes and the rejection of some traditional norms whereas others appear to be more rigid. Conservative or more traditional notions of masculinity are still prevalent, at the same time across the region there is momentum for reshaping masculinity.

All men relate to masculinity norms in some way, and traditional norms often discourage emotional expression, leading to suppressed feelings, strained relationships and mental health issues. These norms can glorify strength and risk-taking, which then fosters violence and stress, including gender-based violence. The avoidance of analysing masculinity norms may stem from their deeply ingrained and personal nature. Nevertheless, a thorough examination of these norms is crucial for effectively addressing the underlying causes of violence.

In response, in 2023, civil society organisations from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova together with a Swedish organisation, launched a regional project aimed at redefining masculinity in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus region. As part of understanding how masculinity norms play out in the region, a set of studies were conducted



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into how existing gender stereotypes and concepts of masculinity influence men and boys in the region.

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This booklet presents summaries of the five studies, with links, where possible, to the original documents in both English and their respective native languages.

Armenia

Shaping Armenian Men's Lives: How Society's Expectations Affect Their Jobs, Feelings and Family Roles



Two studies, one by Armenian Progressive Youth (APY) and another by the Sexual Assault Crisis Center (SACC), explored perceptions of gender stereotypes and masculinity in Armenia. APY's research found that young men often struggle to define what masculinity means to them, though they usually associate it with traits such as power, strength, aggressiveness, rational thinking and being in control. This reflects traditional Armenian ideas of masculinity, which focus on being brave, authoritative and financially stable.

One young man in the focus group described masculinity as meaning "stability, strength, knowledge, brevity." Another participant talked about it in terms of being "serious, stable, reliable, responsible and thoughtful, with the ability to work and financially support a family."

Most young men in the study mentioned that they see their fathers as their main role models. They also listed several groups or institutions that shape their ideas of masculinity: family, friends, education, the media, work, the army, sports and religion.

SACC's study shows how societal expectations and traditional norms affect Armenian men's career choices, how they express their emotions and their roles in the family. A male participant in the focus group noted, "From a young age, we were taught not to cry: it was considered shameful, something reserved for girls... Yet, crying is a natural expression of emotions, a means to release and relax. Personally, I can't recall a time when I cried; instead, I tend to bottle it up inside." However, male participants noted a shift in societal perceptions regarding emotional boundaries, especially after the 2020 war, so that crying has become more accepted among men.



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Gender norms also put pressure on appearances and roles; women are expected to be slim, and men to be tall and muscular, and meanwhile traditional roles prescribe that women manage childcare and household tasks, while men handle finances and repairs.

The studies by APY and SACC are available in both English and Armenian.

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Belarus

Belarusian Men: Balancing Dominant Masculinity with Caring for Their Families



While most men support gender equality in various areas in life, many Belarusian men are homophobic and place a lot of importance on their sexual performance for self-esteem.

Researchers from Belarus* conducted a study on masculinity that looked into how Belarusian men view masculinity, their gender attitudes, their happiness and the challenges they face. In what follows, here are some of the key findings.

Belarusian men generally do not adhere to a demonstrative or aggressive masculinity. Most Belarusian men agree on some key points about masculinity, namely: taking care of loved ones, avoiding violence, being responsible and helping with household chores. However, when clustering Belarusian men into models of masculinity using their responses to the question “what is important in order to feel like an accomplished man in Belarus today”, researchers found that around half of respondents (44%) prefer a dominant form of masculinity. 23% of the men in the study supported a traditional model of a man (serving in the army, providing for his family), while another 23% found a “modern” form of masculinity more appealing and placed the emphasis on technological savviness and self-care. Only 10% of Belarusian men favoured a more tolerant approach, emphasising equality and accepting different lifestyles.

Belarusian men tend to be homophobic and to place a lot of importance on their sexual performance for their own sense of self-esteem. Moreover, the study showed that while most men support gender equality in various areas in life, many of them also don't view inequality as a big problem and claim that gender equality is almost achieved.

Most men in Belarus believe that being a good provider and taking care of family and household duties, including raising kids, are essential characteristics for success. They believe that ensuring their family's welfare and having a stable job are top priorities.



From the Epiphany Run that took place in Minsk on 17 January 2021. Photo: TUT.BY

The study also found that Belarusian men generally report low levels of happiness, with an average score of 5.98 out of 10. Additionally, 29% aren't comfortable discussing their problems, while 49% prefer to talk to their wives or partners, which is also reflected in a common belief that men should not complain.

29%

... of Belarusian men aren't comfortable in discussing their problems with others.

When asked to rate their happiness on a scale from 1 to 10, Belarusian men averaged



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The study is available in both English and Russian.

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*The Belarusian study was completed in 2020, before the political situation in the country made it difficult to gather data in this way. Dedicated researchers and activists continue to engage with Belarusian society from exile; however, their contact details are not included in this publication to ensure their safety.

Georgia

Men in Georgia: Sexualising Women and Struggling with Emotions



In Georgia, Sapari, a women's rights organisation, explored how young men and women view gender issues, focusing on topics such as violence and education about reproductive health and rights. The findings revealed that young women are usually more informed about these issues than young men. For example, women often find themselves teaching men about sexuality and reproductive health, as the men may lack relevant knowledge on these topics.

Women reported having a hard time forming friendships with men because of the constant sexual undertones that men add to such situations, which often lead to uncomfortable or toxic interactions. As one respondent put it: "I have never had a situation where I was comfortable enough around a boy to be able to call him my friend. There are a lot of things causing discomfort; not always, but it is often the case that boys perceive me as a sexual object and I try to no longer have a friendly relationship with them."

Female respondents also pointed out that virginity is still a big deal for most young men when it comes to starting a family. In their experience, a lot of Georgian men still prefer to marry a virgin. However, some women noticed a slight decrease to this conservative view in recent years.

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– Female respondent to study



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Conversely, young men believe that their generation is more open and communicative compared to men from ten or twenty years ago. Nonetheless, despite the young men's belief that their generation is more willing to share emotions and to engage in conversation, the study revealed that they still find it very difficult to discuss topics such as sexuality, impotence and mental health.

The study also showed that Georgian society expects young men to have a job, be financially independent and get married. Being aggressive and taking risks are still seen as signs of masculinity, which in turn reinforces a toxic macho culture. Not meeting these expectations often leads to social stigma and marginalisation.

The study is available in both English and Georgian.

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Moldova

Rethinking Masculinity: Insights from Moldovan Men on Gender Roles, Family and Violence



In the Moldovan study, conducted by Casa Marioarei NGO, a survey with 445 men showed many persisting stereotypical gender norms but also some positive trends. Many Moldovan men still have traditional views about how men should behave and look. 65% of the men believe that a real man must always be strong, 28% say men should not cry and 38% think men shouldn't have long hair or wear earrings. Many of the men also claimed that "real men" do not seek help from psychologists.

At the same time, most men agreed with the following statements: "a woman shouldn't have to obey a man", "raising children shouldn't be just the mother's responsibility" and "men shouldn't be the only ones managing the family budget". Despite these positive indications, issues related to money and wage distribution persist as a power dynamic within families. Typically, men assert dominance due to earning higher incomes, which is often seen as normal because men are expected to support their families financially. As a result, many men find it distressing when women earn more than they do. The study also noted that differences in men's opinions and perceptions on gender roles and divisions of labor seemed to depend largely on their social status in society.

The relationship between gender stereotypes and violence against partners and children was also explored in the study, as well as personal experiences of violence and its impact on men's behaviour. Almost 80% of the men surveyed understand that a woman never deserves to be beaten by her partner, but at the same time, around half of the respondents suggested that sexualised violence can be a result of women's behaviour or way of dressing. The most stereotypical perceptions of gender norms were found among the men's with own experiences of violence.

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While the results of this research indicate that traditional gender roles and stereotypes influence many spheres in Moldovans lives, the focus group discussions held in all regions in the country showed that most men, especially the younger ones, were open to understand more, discuss and transform social roles of men and women.

The study is available in both English and Romanian.

[READ THE STUDY](#)



Conclusion

Challenging Gender Stereotypes: Current Realities and Future Actions in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova

The studies in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova have shown that many of the gender stereotypes that women's rights advocates have been fighting against are still engrained in society. As highlighted here, deeply entrenched stereotypes and societal norms significantly shape men's behaviours, influencing their actions in personal, professional and familial settings. Expectations on men to always appear strong, to hide their vulnerability and to dominate in relationships reflect a rigid view of gender roles that still affects the younger generation.

Traditional gender roles and stereotypes still strongly impact the division of responsibilities between men and women in families, workplaces and society across all four countries. However, the studies also revealed differences between countries and among different generations of men. While young men in Armenia and Georgia struggle to navigate societal expectations, married and older men in Moldova are more open to discussing gender roles, and in Belarus, they show a greater inclination to care for their loved ones.

The internal negotiation between changing attitudes and persistent stereotypes reveals the complexities in shifting gender norms across different regions and age groups.

To tackle these issues, five civil society organisations from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, along with the Swedish organisation MÄN, supported by the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), have started a series of activities to help



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men break free from gender stereotypes and harmful masculinity norms. These activities are designed to engage men and boys in promoting gender equality and standing up against violence.

In the coming years, the project REDEFINE will continue to explore masculinity issues in these countries by holding workshops with men, creating media content, staging plays and engaging in other creative activities to inspire change.

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