

Perception vs. Reality?

The EU and AA countries' shared gender gaps

Loes Debuysere¹



Gender gaps in the participation of Moldovan, Georgian and Ukrainian citizens in the political, social and economic realm are [in most cases](#) not substantially different than those in EU countries. Due at least in part to a Soviet legacy that prioritized an equal role for women in society, perceptions about levels of gender equality are quite positive in the three East European countries that have made Association Agreements (AA) with the EU. Nevertheless, significant levels of gender inequality persist within the labour force and in formal politics, with imbalances in the latter particularly marked compared to EU member states.

¹ Researcher at CEPS.

Perceptions about gender equality and other political values

On average citizens in the three AA countries are quite satisfied about levels of gender equality in their country. A [2018 EU Neighbours East survey](#) finds that Ukrainians, Moldovans and Georgians are more satisfied about the level of gender equality in their country than about any other political value or objective, be it freedom of media, respect for human rights or good governance. While men are generally a little more satisfied than women, gender equality does figure on top of the list of perceived achievements for both genders.

In line with gender equality, other fundamental freedoms (of speech and the media, and human rights) are also viewed relatively favourable in all three AA countries, whereas the quality of governance (including the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and corruption) is viewed unfavourably. What is interesting, however, is that women tend to be less convinced that all these values and objectives apply in their country compared to men. This raises questions as to whether and how democratic values and governance, or a lack thereof, impact women's lives differently.

Actual gender equality gaps

Moving beyond citizens' perceptions, the [2018 Global Gender Gap Index](#) of the World Economic Forum provides insights into the actual levels of gender equality in the labour market, politics, the health sector and education in the three AA countries. While access to health care and education are both quasi gender-equal, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine score particularly low in terms of formal political participation. Indeed, compared to EU member states, female political representation in national parliaments (around 15% on average) and as ministers lags significantly behind.

While less marked than political inequality and more in line with their EU counterparts, the three AA countries also witness significant levels of gender inequality in the labour market. Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian women are overall less active in the labour force than their male compatriots, with a gender gap of up to 15%. Their inactivity is not merely due to unemployment – as men outnumber women in unemployment numbers and figures – but also to the fact that a larger share of women does not participate in the formal economy, instead engaging in unpaid forms of labour at home as for example housewives. The Global Gender Gap Index also shows that female part-time work is less common in the AA countries than it is in many EU member states, like Sweden, Germany and Italy.

Gendered patterns in education and the labour market

These gender disparities in the workforce can at least in part be explained by another phenomenon drawn from quantitative datasets: the persistence of gender stereotypical patterns in both education and employment. Indeed, according to a [2017 dataset of UNESCO](#), enrolment in higher education is highly gendered in the three AA countries. While women are overrepresented in study domains relating to education,

health and welfare (70% female enrolment on average), they severely lag behind in engineering and IT (around 18% female enrolment on average). Similar patterns can be found in Sweden, Germany and Italy.

Likewise, gender stereotypical patterns can also be detected in the labour force of all three AA states. Overall, based on a [2017 ILO Labour Force](#) survey, women dominate in public administration and the social sector (up to 70% women), while sectors characterized by more physical labour, like construction or mining, are male-dominated (up to 90% men). Here again, these findings are similar to the situation in a comparator group of EU member states (Sweden, Germany and Italy), with even 'feminist' Sweden not performing much better compared to other countries.

Perception versus reality?

Gender segregation in education and the labour market, due to unequal gender roles and stereotypes, has a major impact on women's position in society. It contributes to women taking up jobs that are generally characterized by lower pay and lower status, which not only helps to explain women's absence from the highest levels of formal politics but also the persistence of gender wage gaps. Indeed, a [2018 World Economic Forum](#) and a [2014/16 ILO](#) dataset illustrate that gender pay gaps, both in terms of equal pay for similar work and in terms of overall average earnings, are significant (gaps up to 30% and more) in both the AA countries and EU member states.

All this hints at a final gender gap: the one between perceptions and realities. While citizens in both AA and EU countries generally assess their country's women's rights record in positive terms, this appreciation does not always fully match gendered realities. Indeed, while both regions share – sometimes rightly so – a certain satisfaction and optimism concerning gendered achievements, they also still share significant gender gaps and challenges, especially in terms of equal political representation and economic participation.