

BEWARE OF NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM

WHY SPANISH YOUNG PEOPLE ARE
LESS SEXIST BUT MORE ANTIFEMINIST

Javier Carbonell



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite Spain's government being one of the strongest supporters of gender-equality policies, antifeminist narratives are growing among Spain's Generation Z population. Through original quantitative analysis and qualitative focus groups, this policy study aims to explain why this is the case and what can be done about it. This policy study is part of the FEPS project *EqualiZe*, which analyses whether European young people are more ideologically polarised across gender lines than previous generations.

Gen Z in Spain is showing a clear rightward shift. The findings indicate that, over the past decade, young men in particular have moved significantly to the ideological right. Among those who already lean right, this shift has also meant becoming more radical in their voting, with support moving from centre-right to far-right parties. As a result, they are now the group most likely to back far-right forces. This trend is also reflected in their strong antifeminist attitudes.

However, this shift is not limited to young men. While young women were initially more left wing, between 2022 and 2023, a similar rightward trend has begun to appear among them. In their case, it shows up both as a general ideological move to the right and as a moderation in voting among those on the left, with support shifting from far-left to centre-left parties. At the same time, this group has also shown a decline in feminist identification. That said, most young people are still not right wing. Young women remain the group most supportive of gender equality, and young men generally hold less sexist views than older men. This makes young people's relationship with gender equality somewhat paradoxical: even as they express less sexism, they are also more likely to reject feminism.

While media portrayals often focus on gender differences, this policy study focuses on what all young people have in common: coming of age in amid rising living costs, housing insecurity, labour market uncertainty, geopolitical instability and deep changes in gender relations. This policy study argues that the rightward shift can largely be explained by two interrelated interpretations of these structural changes. The first is the strong influence of neoliberal and individualistic forms of feminism among younger generations. In the focus groups, young people tended to define gender equality mainly as the absence of restrictions on women's freedom, rather than as equality of outcomes. Many participants also felt that gender equality among young people had already been achieved or was very close to it. Meritocratic ideas were widespread, and young women often expressed confidence in their ability to overcome sexism and succeed professionally through their own efforts. Young men, for their part, did not generally see themselves as disadvantaged compared to women, but many criticised gender laws, arguing that they give women unfair advantages.

This form of neoliberal feminism is closely linked to a second factor: a deep dissatisfaction among young people with the current establishment, largely driven by their precarious economic situation. Widespread distrust of political institutions and politicians helps explain why feminism – often seen as part of the establishment due to its association with the current socialist government – is viewed negatively by many. Participants frequently described it as divisive, conflict-driven and inauthentic. At the same time, neoliberal feminism's scepticism towards collective action and state intervention helps explain young people's doubts about the effectiveness of gender policies. It also sheds light on their opposition to

measures that treat men and women differently, such as gender quotas, as well as their tendency to distinguish between what they see as “real” and “false” feminisms.

Neoliberal feminism is problematic because, while it shares some principles with more progressive versions of feminism, it focuses on individual women, overlooks structural inequalities, aligns with economically right-wing ideas, and undermines the collective and public action needed for gender equality. Therefore, while much of the debate among progressives has centred on the overt sexism of tradwives and far-right content, greater attention should also be given to critiquing neoliberal, individualistic forms of feminism.

In summary, much of what young people express through gender debates is linked to broader structural processes, including economic decline, housing insecurity, growing individualism and the weakening of collective organisation, which makes neoliberal forms of feminism more attractive. Addressing these issues – both discursively and through policy – would help make backlash and antifeminism less appealing.

Therefore, this policy study makes the following recommendations:

- **Reframe progressive gender discourse:** highlight the limits of neoliberal feminism, engage not only young men but also young women, develop a positive vision of progressive masculinity, and adopt a more antiestablishment stance by treating antifeminist narratives as part of the new status quo.
- **Link gender politics to economic concerns:** since much antifeminism is driven by young people’s economic malaise, prioritising economic policies – especially on housing and income – can indirectly strengthen support for gender equality and rebuild trust in progressive politics.
- **Advance gender-equality policies:** continue promoting equality while strengthening responses to gender-based violence (through better support services and faster justice), reducing pay gaps, and supporting families with flexible work and child benefits.
- **Rebuild organisational infrastructure:** counter social atomisation by strengthening feminist organisations, unions, civil society and political mobilisation, while regulating social media and artificial intelligence ecosystems that amplify antifeminist narratives.

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace to discuss the gender-political division between young people.¹ The left focuses on young men's rising support for the far right, increasing bellicosity against feminism, and the consumption of manosphere content and increasing acceptance of authoritarianism.² The far right focuses on stories of increasingly progressive young women, with some movements in the USA even suggesting repealing the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote.³

However, data on the subject is extremely varied, with different national contexts producing different gender divides. In some countries, such as the UK, both genders are shifting ideologically leftwards, though young women are doing so more quickly;⁴ in others, both are moving to the right, but young men at a faster pace,⁵ while in many Eastern European states, no significant ideological gender divide appears at all.⁶ Moreover, although they are interrelated, gender gaps in attitudes do not automatically translate into ideological divides, which, in turn, do not necessarily mirror voting divisions.

This policy study explores how these dynamics are playing out in Spain. Spain represents an interesting paradox; on one hand, it is one of the few left-wing

governments in Europe and has enacted some of the most pioneering gender-equality legislation on the continent over the last decade.⁷ On the other hand, it has also experienced a strong far-right radicalisation among young men and a recent rightward shift among young women.⁸ Moreover, self-identification as a feminist has declined in recent years among all young people, including young women.⁹ Why is Spain seeing declining support for feminism in its younger population despite its policy advances?

This study analyses this question in four chapters. The first seeks to understand the ideologies, attitudes and voting behaviour of young people in Spain. This chapter uses survey data from various sources, primarily the European Social Survey (ESS), to address this question. The second chapter tries to provide some explanations behind the numbers. Therefore, it analyses three focus groups conducted with young people in the surroundings of Madrid in November 2025. The third chapter discusses the main findings, the structural causes of the results and current dangers that neoliberal feminism pose to gender equality. Finally, the last chapter puts forward recommendations on what can be done to improve gender equality in Spain and to win back those young people who have abandoned feminism.

Methodology

This study is part of the FEPS Equalize project on youth and gender equality in Europe and draws on three data sources.

The first source is an original analysis of data from the ESS, conducted by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off. This analysis draws on two components: a longitudinal survey battery with consistent questions since 2002, covering ideology and voting behaviour; and the 2024 wave's specialised module on gender attitudes. The ESS covers all EU-27 countries, as well as Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the UK. The 2024 wave includes 41,242 respondents across 24 countries, while the longitudinal dataset comprises more than 460,000 respondents. The "young" cohort is defined as those aged 15-29 and is compared with the 30-49, 50-64 and 65+ age groups.¹⁰

The second source of quantitative data draws on other materials, mainly the author's previous work, including the reports "Youth support for democracy in Spain" (produced as part of an earlier FEPS and FES project on youth),¹¹ "From Precarious to Providers: How young men's economic decline fuels the antifeminist backlash"¹² and "A Room of One's Own is all you can afford: Why young women move to the far right"¹³ for the European Policy Centre. Whenever a graph from another source is used, this is clearly indicated.

The third source of data comes from three focus groups conducted by the author in Madrid in November 2025. Focus groups

were chosen as a methodology because they allowed participants to challenge, refine and justify their views through interaction, rather than treating attitudes as fixed and private. Participants were recruited with the support of the research provider Calma Research, using targeted sampling and screening to ensure diversity in age, occupation, place of residence and party preference. The groups were conducted under the online supervision of djpart, which coordinated the qualitative research across the five Equalize countries (Spain, Greece, Poland, Sweden and Germany). Each country held at least one female-only group, one male-only group and one mixed group.

The semi-structured sessions lasted around 90 minutes and followed a guideline agreed in advance by the research team, designed to ensure comparability while allowing space for participant-led discussion and disagreement. The Spanish focus groups included seven participants in the mixed group, three in the female-only group and six in the male-only group. Participants were aged between 20 and 29. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Participants received information sheets and provided written consent. Participation was voluntary, and they were reminded of their right to withdraw. Audio files and transcripts were handled under strict confidentiality and data protection standards. Identifying details were removed, and all participants are anonymised in reporting.

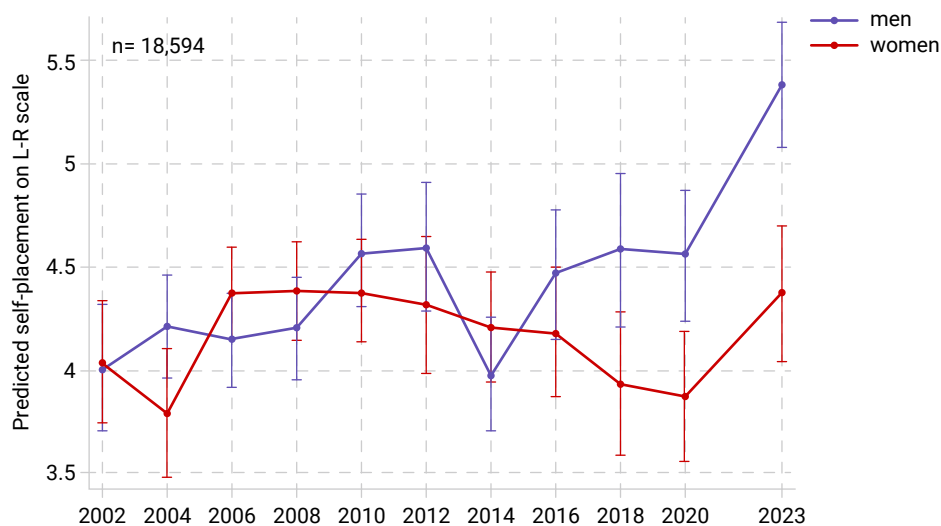
1. GENDER IDEOLOGY, VOTING AND ATTITUDES

1.1 Ideology

Are younger generations (18-29 years old) in Spain more ideologically polarised across gender lines than previous cohorts?¹⁴ The answer is yes. ESS data

shows that young people in Spain have historically been slightly to the left of centre – until now (Figure 1). Over the past two decades, men and women followed similar political trajectories, and shifts to the left or right occurred in parallel.¹⁵

Figure 1. Left-right self-placement of young Spaniards (18-29).



Note: 0 = far-left and 10 = far-right.

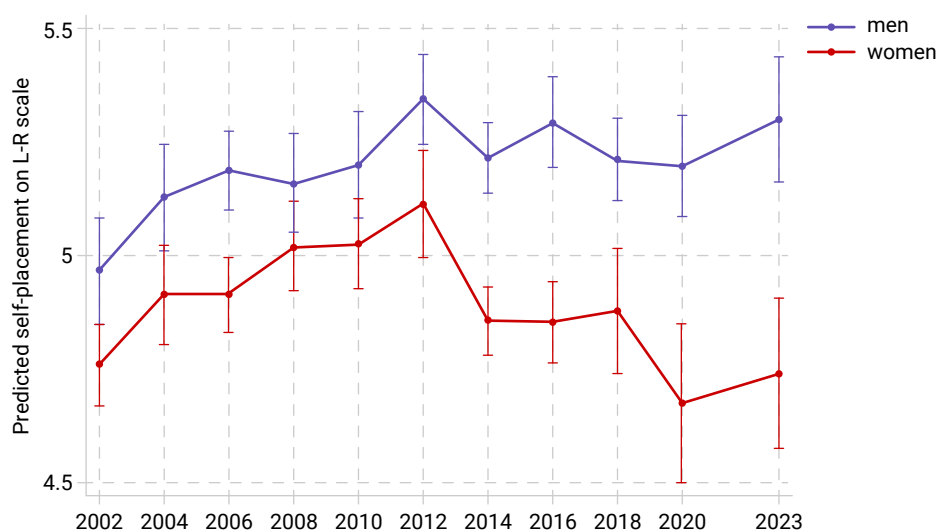
Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

The main gender divide, however, emerges around 2016, when young men and women begin to move in opposite directions: men shift sharply to the right, while women move left. However, since around 2023, young women have also turned rightward, reaching their most right-leaning position in a decade. The gender gap persists, but it now reflects a difference in pace rather than direction, with young men moving further right more quickly than young women.

How does this compare with other European countries (Figure 2)? Spain presents two differences and one similarity. The first difference is that, in general, young Spanish people are historically

more left wing than the European average. The similarity is the evolution of young women. In both Europe and Spain, young women started to turn left around 2012, accelerated this left-wing trend around 2018, but then reversed it around 2022 and 2023. The second difference is the evolution of young men. While young men elsewhere in Europe have remained relatively stable, Spanish young men initially followed women in shifting left around 2012, but after 2018, they turned sharply to the right, much more than their European counterparts. As a result, whereas in Europe the ideological gender gap is largely driven by women moving left, in Spain it is primarily driven by men moving starkly to the right.

Figure 2. Left-right self-placement of young Europeans (18-29).



Note: 0 = far-left and 10 = far-right.

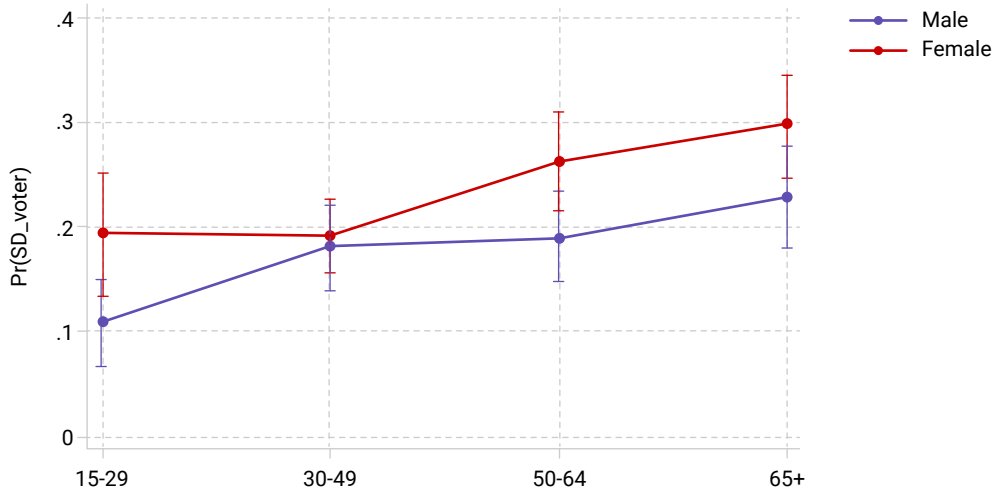
Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

1.2 Voting

Does this ideological gender divide among young people translate into voting behaviour? The general Western trend is that women vote more for left-wing parties and men vote more for right-wing parties.¹⁶ Given that left and green parties are more supportive of gender equality,¹⁷ while the far right often promotes antifeminist positions, some voting theories suggest that greater salience of these issues among younger generations would incentivise young women to vote more for left or green parties and young men to vote more for the far right.¹⁸ Is this the case in Spain?

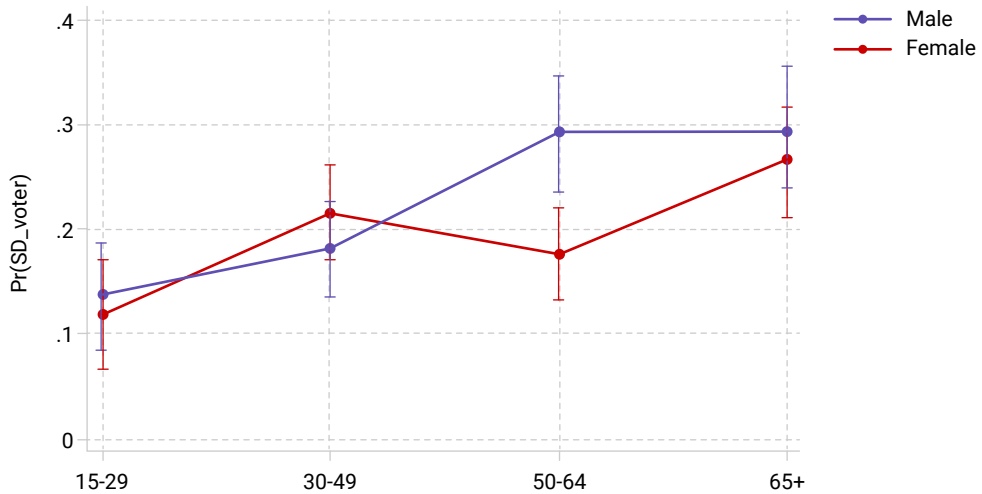
The results show that, for mainstream parties, gender differences are limited (Figures 3 and 4). Age matters more: older voters are far more likely to support established parties than younger ones. In gender terms, aside from slightly higher support for PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) among women, both major parties show a fairly balanced electorate.

Figure 3. Votes for PSOE by age and gender.



Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

Figure 4. Votes for PP (*Partido Popular*) by age and gender.

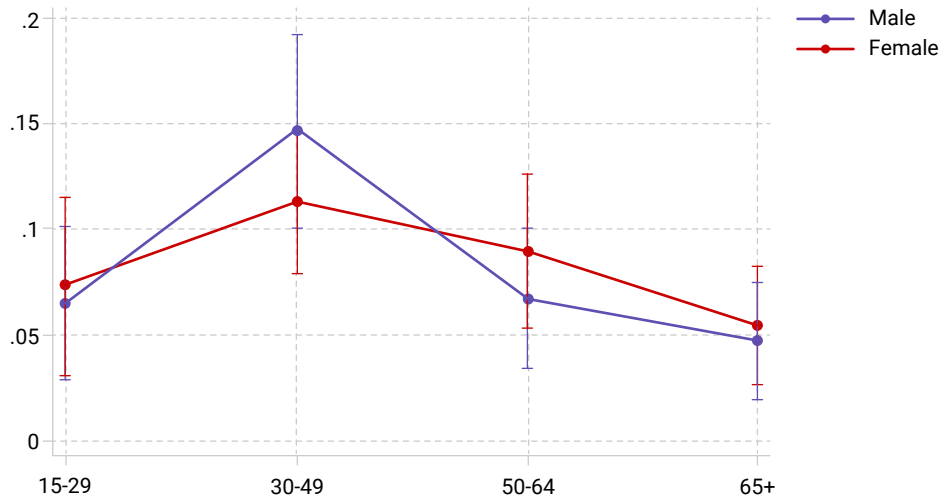


Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

Among green and far-left parties, Spanish youth also show little gender divide. Young men and women vote at similar rates for Sumar (Figure 5). It is worth noting, however, that Generation Z is less supportive of the far left than Spanish millennials.¹⁹ This likely reflects the fact that the Spanish far left peaked around 2016, when millennials were young, and has declined since, making it a less attractive option

overall.²⁰ Thus, progressive young people vote more for centre-left than far-left parties. Compared to countries like Germany,²¹ there is no clear pattern of progressive radicalisation among young women's voting in Spain. If anything, in recent years, young women appear to have moderated their vote, in line with the broader ideological moderation noted earlier.

Figure 5. Votes for Sumar by age and gender.

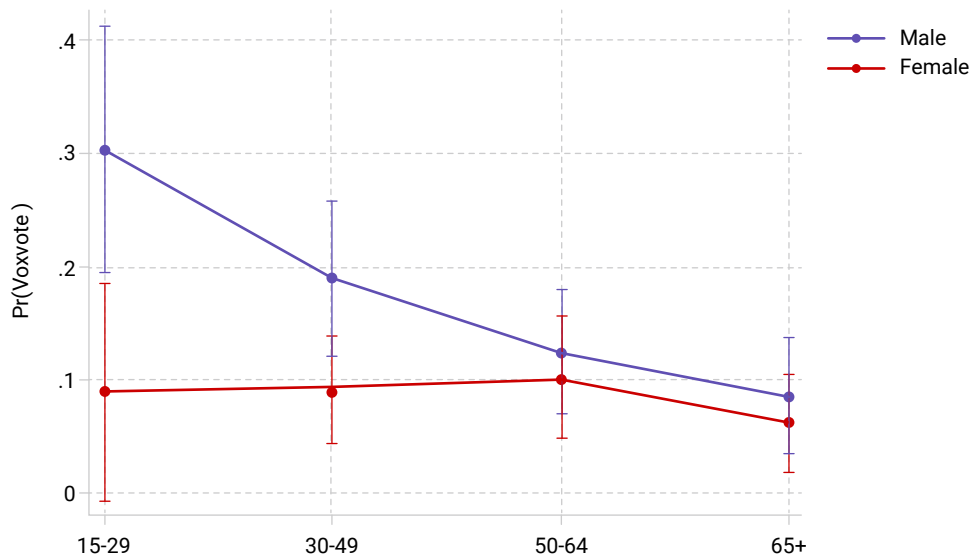


Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

The key development in Spain, however, is that young men are far more likely than young women to vote for the far right. According to ESS data, young men are nearly three times as likely as young women to report having voted for Vox in the last general election (Figure 6). Data from the European Election Survey (EES), based on European elections, suggests an even larger gap, with 4.6

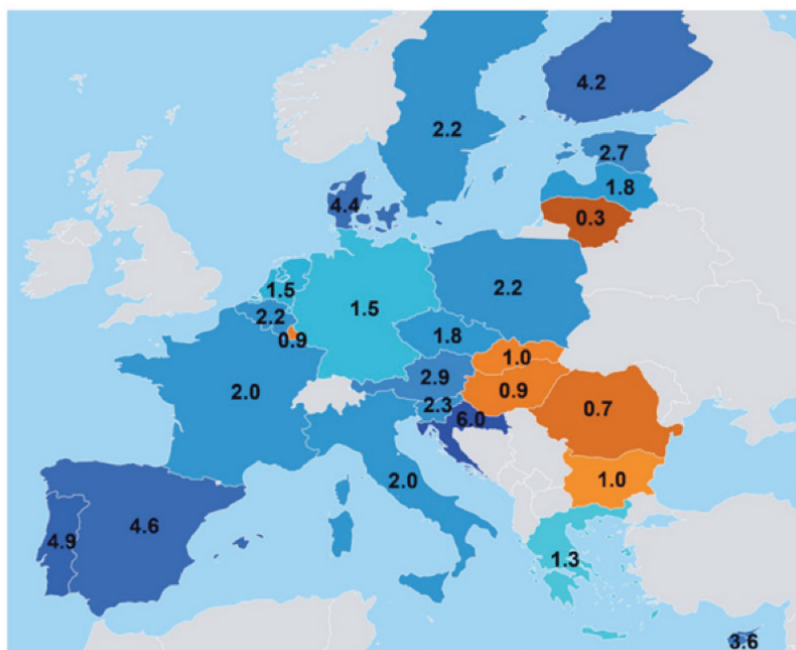
young men voting for the far right for every young woman who did.²² This aligns with the ideological trends discussed earlier. In Spain, both young men and women are shifting to the right, but young men are also undergoing a marked voting radicalisation, increasingly supporting far-right parties across Europe (Figure 7).²³

Figure 6. Votes for Vox by age and gender.



Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

Figure 7. Ratio of under-25 male to female far-right voters in the 2024 European elections.



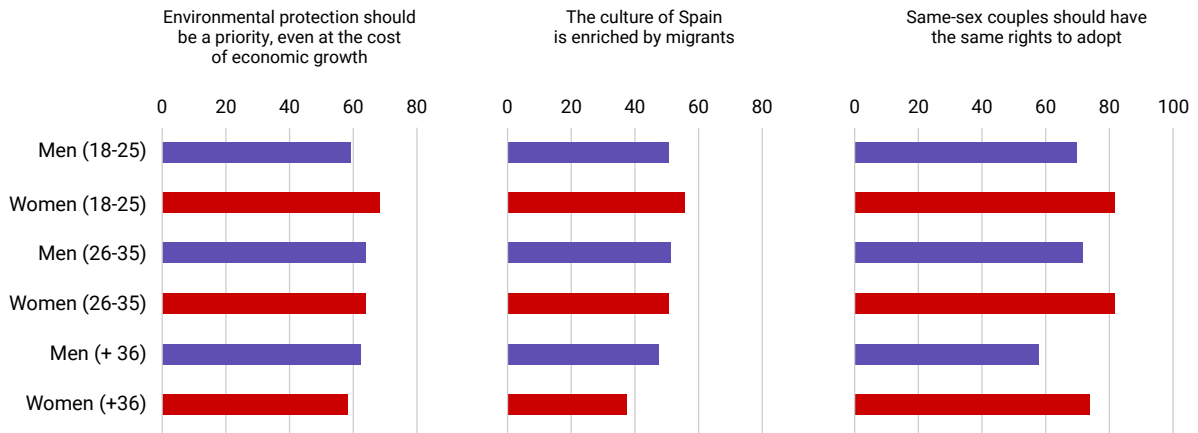
Source: Analysis by Javier Carbonell with Europeans Elections Survey (EES) data.

1.3 Attitudes

What explains this ideological and voting divergence? Do young Spanish men and women hold different attitudes on gender and other issues? Overall, young people’s views on politics, economics and cultural topics do not appear to differ greatly

by gender (Figure 8). Young women tend to place more emphasis on environmental protection, are more open to migration and show stronger support for LGBTQ+ rights, but these differences are not particularly pronounced.²⁴ Overall, attitudes among young people remain broadly similar.

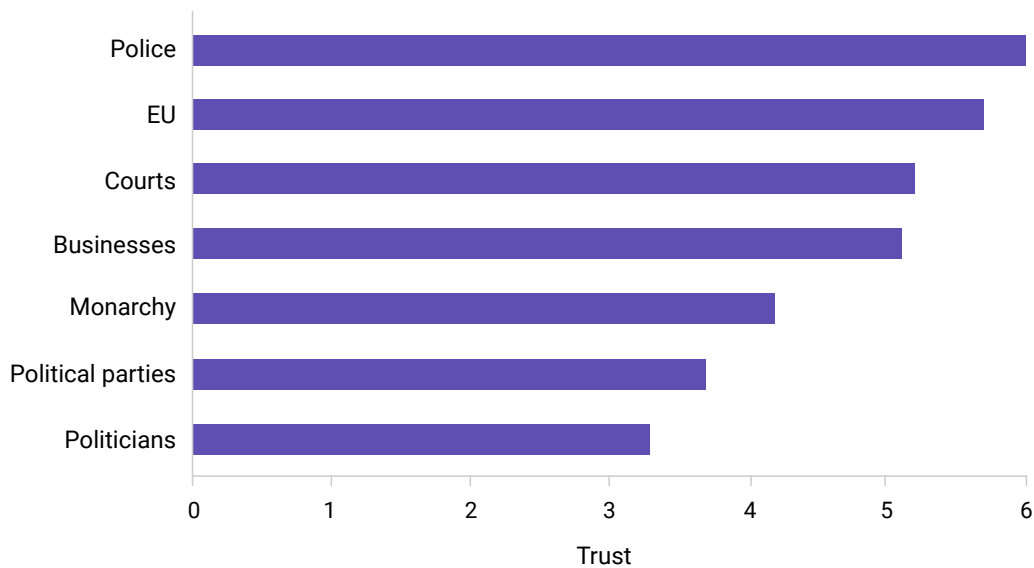
Figure 8. Attitudinal differences on climate, immigration and homosexuality by age and gender.



Source: Data from Cordero, Ramírez-Dueñas, and Sánchez (2025).

Regarding opinions on politics, both political parties and politicians are the least trusted institutions by young Spaniards.

Figure 9. Young Spaniards' (16-35) trust in institutions.



Note: Average score in a scale from 0 to 10.

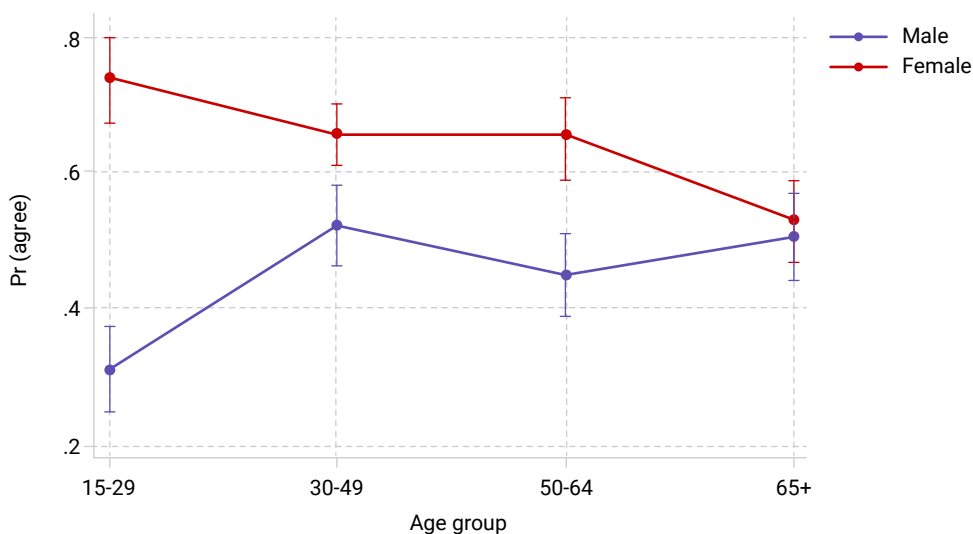
Source: Data from Informe de Juventud España 2024 (INJUVE).

However, a different picture emerges when focusing on gender attitudes. Gender attitudes include several dimensions; here, we look at views on the workplace, gender-based violence and feminism.

On workplace inequality, ESS respondents were asked whether *“women are treated less fairly than men in hiring, pay or promotions at work”* (0 = no, 1 =

yes). The results show a clear divide between young men and young women, and between them and older groups (Figure 10). While older generations tend to hold more moderate views, young women are the most likely to agree with the statement, whereas young men are the most likely to reject it. This pattern is consistent with trends across Europe.

Figure 10. Spaniards’ attitudes towards workplace discrimination.

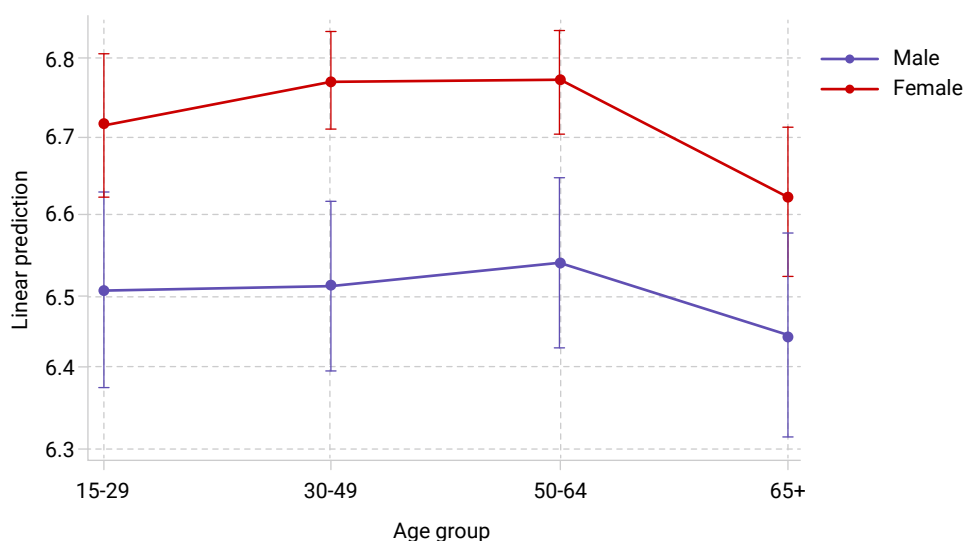


Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

On equal pay – measured by agreement with the statement *“Is it good or bad for [country’s] economy if women and men are paid equally?”* (1 = very bad, 7 = very good) – two points stand out (Figure 11). Firstly, most respondents view it positively, with average scores differing only by small margins across age groups. Secondly, while some gender differences

appear among older cohorts, among young people, the gap is minimal and only significant at the 90% confidence level. Therefore, overall, attitudes towards equal pay in Spain are very positive and show little gender variation. Gender differences are more pronounced at the European level.

Figure 11. Spaniards' attitudes towards equal pay.

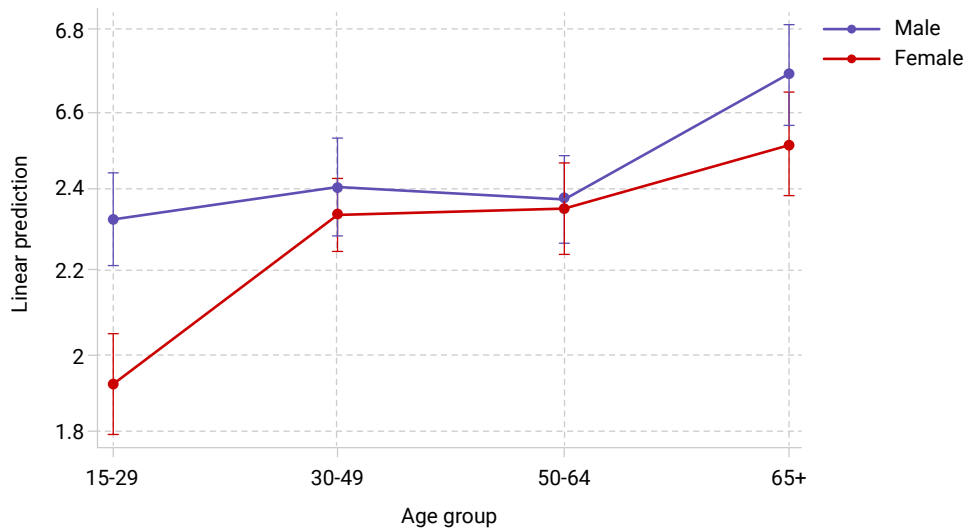


Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

Another key dimension of gender attitudes is views on gender-based violence. Respondents were asked, "How often do women exaggerate claims of sexual harassment in the workplace?" (on a 1-5 scale, from never to always). The results show a clear age pattern: older people are more likely to believe such claims are exaggerated than younger people (Figure 12). This aligns with the idea that, as gender equality advances, these issues become more visible and

more widely challenged by the young. There is also a marked gender gap among young people. Young women are far less likely than any other group to say that claims are exaggerated. By contrast, young men do not differ significantly from middle-aged men, although they believe it less than men over 65.

Figure 12. Spaniards' attitudes towards sexual harassment in the workplace.

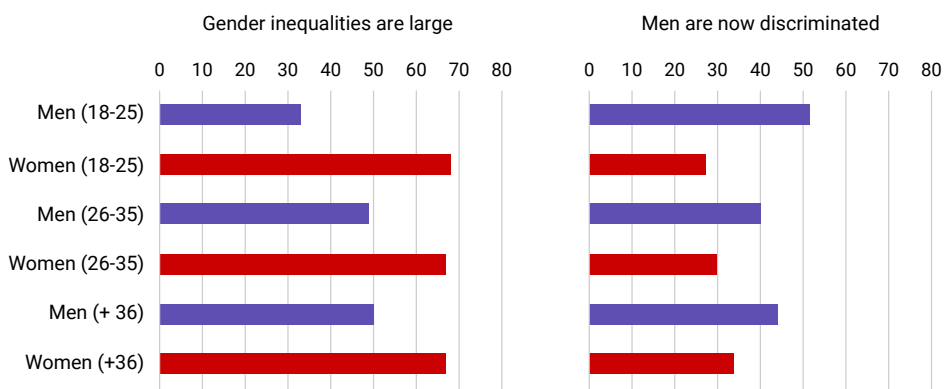


Source: Analysis by Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron and Gefjon Off with ESS data.

However, it is in the political dimension of gender attitudes where the gender contrast becomes clear (Figure 13). Young men are the least likely to see gender inequalities as significant in Spain and are the group most likely to agree that “men are now discriminated against”.²⁵ That said, nearly 30% of young women also support this view, which is notable.

The statement itself is ambiguous, as it does not specify who is seen as discriminating against men – society, women or particular policies.²⁶ Overall, however, young men take a much more critical stance on gender equality and related policies, in sharp contrast to the consistent support these receive from women across age groups.

Figure 13. Spaniards' attitudes towards gender inequality and male discrimination.

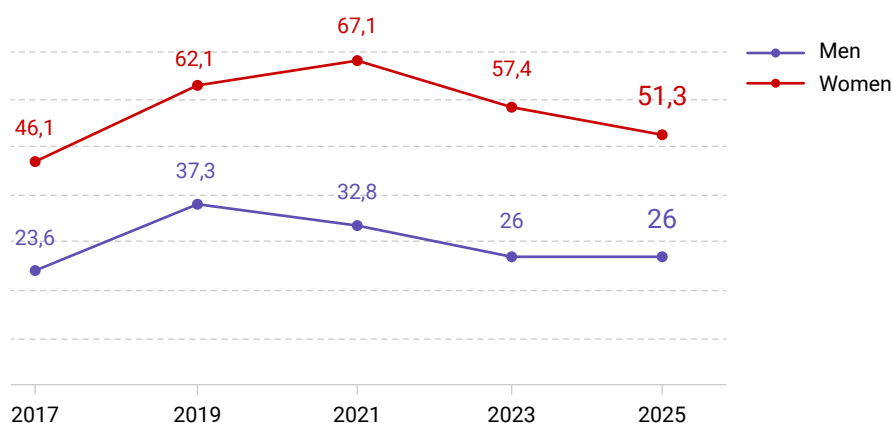


Source: Data from Cordero, Ramírez-Dueñas, and Sánchez (2025).

When asked about support for feminism, clear gender differences emerge: only 26% of young men identify as feminist, compared to 51% of young women, according to Fundación FAD Juventud (FAD) data (Figure 14).²⁷ Moreover, young men's self-identification as feminists has declined since

2019. Nevertheless, this trend is not limited to men. Feminist identification is also falling among young women, dropping from 67% in 2021 to 51% in 2025. While young women remain more supportive of feminism than other groups, this support has weakened in recent years.

Figure 14. Degree of feminist identification among young Spaniards (15-29).

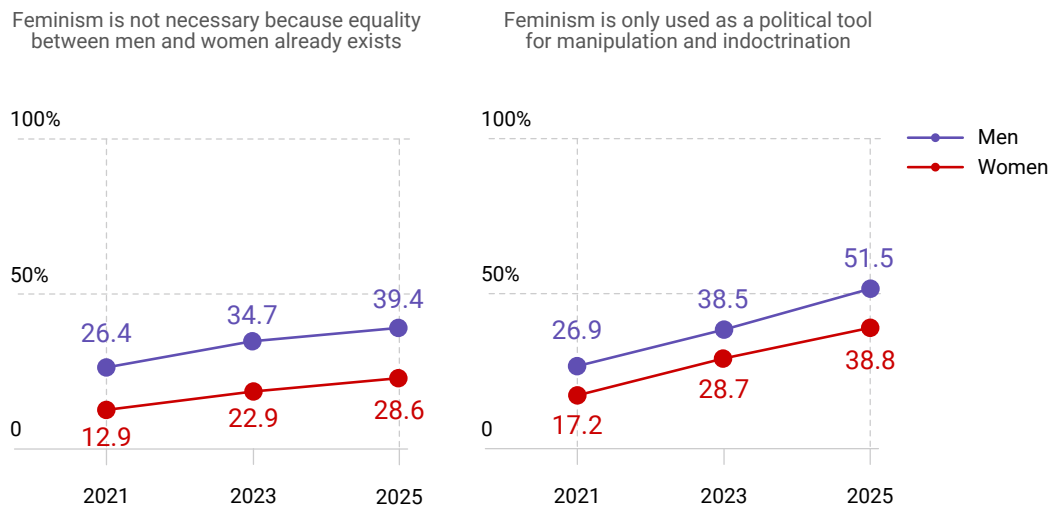


Source: Data from FAD Juventud (2026).

Moreover, when asked about their understanding of feminism, both young men and women are increasingly likely to see it as a “political tool” (Figure 15).²⁸ As a result, feminism is strongly associated with politics and viewed with growing mistrust by both

groups. At the same time, since 2021 there has been a rising belief among young people that feminism is no longer necessary because its goals have already been achieved. Although most still disagree with this view, its prevalence is clearly increasing (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Young Spaniards' (15-29) opinion on feminism.



Note: Percentage of agreement with statements. Agreement from 7 to 10 on a 0–10 scale (0 = not at all in agreement; 10 = completely in agreement).

Source: Data from FAD Juventud (2026).

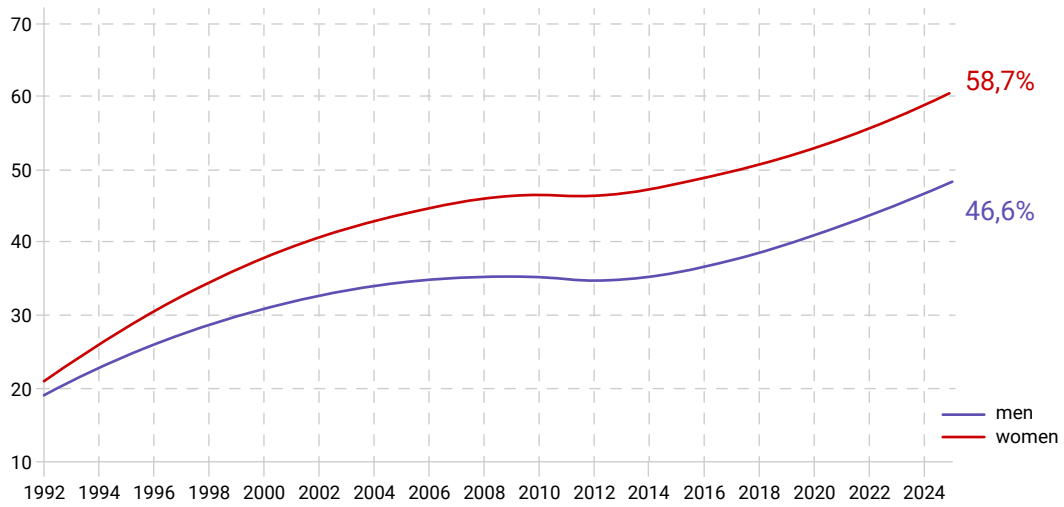
So, are young men and women diverging in their attitudes? And are young men more sexist than older men? The evidence is mixed. On one hand, young men support equal pay at similar levels to young women and are no more likely than older men to believe that women exaggerate harassment claims. On the other, they are the group most likely to deny workplace discrimination against women and to agree that men are now discriminated against. Ideologically, they are also shifting most strongly to the right and show the highest support for the far right. Overall, young men appear less sexist than older men in some respects but more opposed to feminism in others.

Young women also display some contradictions. They are more likely to recognise gender inequalities and gender-based violence, and they show stronger support for feminism and less support for the far

right. However, they are also shifting ideologically to the right. At the same time, feminist identification is declining, and more negative views of feminism are becoming more common.

Could this seemingly contradictory evidence be explained by changes in the labour market positions of young men and women? To some extent, yes. While young Western women have seen gains in income, wealth and education, young men have experienced declines in these areas compared to previous generations.²⁹ As a result, young men face growing competition in the labour market from young women, who are beginning to surpass them in key domains. In education, for example, young men attend university at much lower rates (46%) than young women (58%) (Figure 16).³⁰

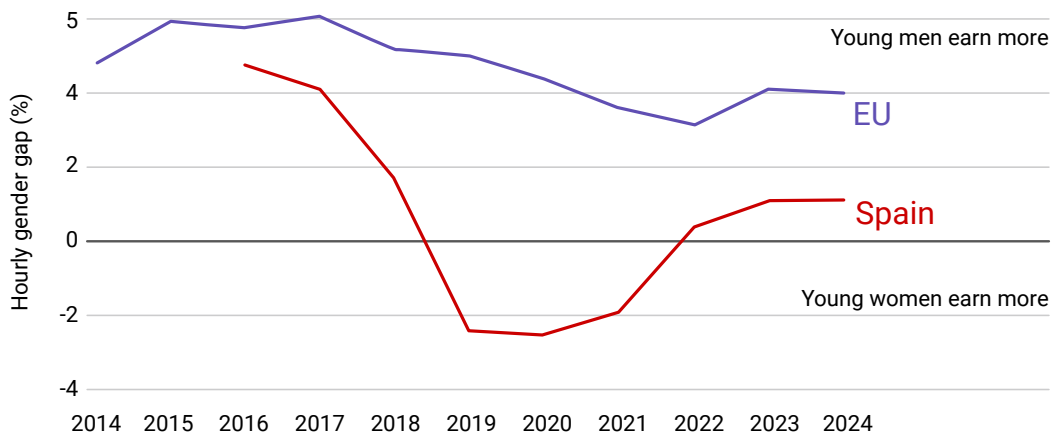
Figure 16. Percentage of Spaniards (25-34) with university education.



Source: Analysis by Javier Carbonell with Eurostat data.

Moreover, this has also affected incomes. For the first time in history, young women now earn per hour as much as – or even slightly more than – young men (Figure 17).³¹

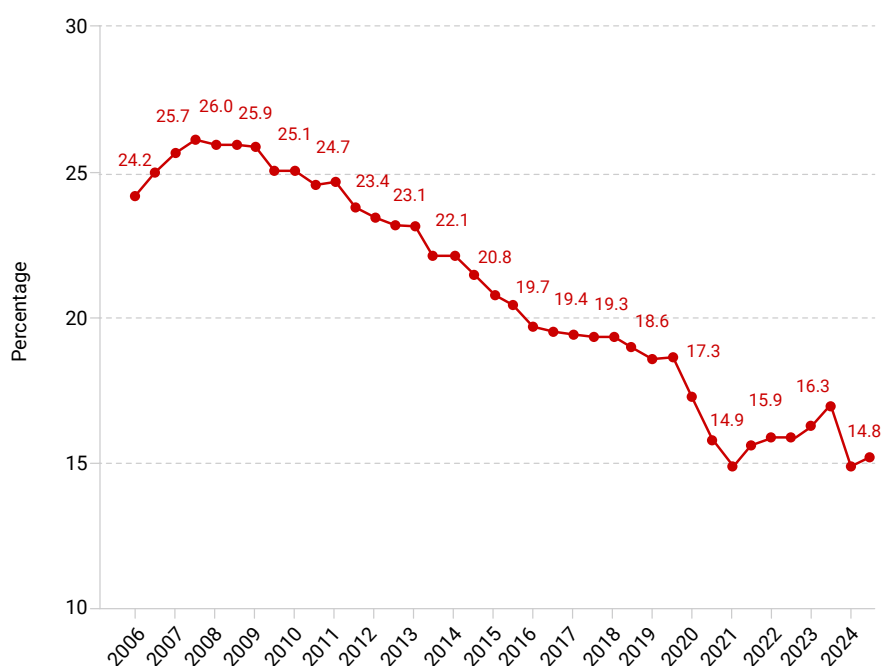
Figure 17. Evolution of the under-25 gender gap in Spain.



Source: Analysis by Javier Carbonell with Eurostat data.

Nevertheless, these positive improvements have all taken place in a general context of economic decline of the income, wealth and access to housing of all young people in Spain (Figure 18).

Figure 18. The decline of economic independence of young people in Spain.



Note: Percentage of young people economically independent from their parents.

Source: Spanish Youth Forum.

Therefore, it is not surprising that young men believe there is no discrimination against women in the workplace, as young women are now more educated and earn essentially the same as they do. It is also not surprising that, while they misjudge the extent of gender-based violence in the workplace, as they do not experience it, they are supportive of other policies, such as equal pay. Moreover, the general economic decline of young people might affect their distrust of the current establishment. While these social transformations can help explain some of the ideological and attitudinal positions of young people, they are not enough; it is crucial to explore how young people conceive of gender equality, feminism and politics, which is what the next chapter is devoted to.

1.4 Summary

The analysis of the data provides support for the following statements:

1. There is a big gender divide in Spain between young men and young women, initially produced because young men moved right and young women left.
2. Since between 2022 and 2023, young women have also moved rightwards; thus, this is not just about young men.
3. In voting, while left-wing Spanish young women are moderating their vote (from Sumar to PSOE), there is a stark radicalisation of right-wing young men (from PP to Vox).
4. In attitudinal terms, young men are less sexist than older men but more opposed to feminism.
5. There is a general decrease in feminist self-identification and a growing criticism of political feminism across all youngsters.

2. NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM

The previous chapter highlighted three main paradoxes. Firstly, despite a clear gender divide, both young men and women show a broader rightward shift in ideology and voting. Secondly, although young women hold more progressive gender attitudes and care about these issues, they are increasingly moving rightward and expressing greater distrust of feminism. Thirdly, while young men display less sexism than older men on some dimensions, they are also more critical of feminism. How can these patterns be explained?

This chapter draws on three focus groups (one male-only, one female-only and one mixed) to explore how young people understand gender, feminism and politics, and how these views shape their everyday lives.³² Attitudes on gender are diverse and complex, combining personal experiences with broader beliefs, making it difficult to identify a single, unified narrative. The framework developed here reflects an iterative process, comparing initial expectations with empirical findings and refining them in light of the evidence.

A common thread across participants' accounts is the strong presence of neoliberal, individualistic – or “girlboss” – forms of feminism. This approach centres on individual advancement within existing systems, focusing less on challenging power structures and more on helping women succeed within them.³³ It emphasises women's finances, representation in leadership, and improving outcomes through personal skills and confidence.

While much attention has been given to the rise of tradwife content or female antifeminists,³⁴ there has also been a significant growth in books and online content focused on women's financial success, business networks and self-improvement. This trend aligns with a highly meritocratic view of the economy, where individuals are valued for

their skills.³⁵ However, this individual focus often overlooks broader structural inequalities.

While no participant fully adheres to all the tenets of neoliberal feminism – and among more left-leaning participants it often coexists with other feminist perspectives – its influence is strong across both genders and political positions. Participants did not, of course, describe themselves as “girlbosses” or “neoliberal feminists”, but many echoed the core arguments and assumptions of these perspectives.

The prominence of neoliberal feminism provides a useful lens for interpreting several focus-group findings. It helps explain why most participants, while recognising the presence of sexism in the past and among older generations, felt that gender equality had largely been achieved within their own cohort and did not see themselves as personally disadvantaged by their gender. It also clarifies why gender equality was mainly understood as the absence of barriers to individual freedom, rather than as equality of outcomes.

This view aligns with strong meritocratic beliefs across both genders, centred on evaluating individuals by their own efforts and ability, as well as with young women's confidence in overcoming sexism and progressing professionally. As for men, participants generally rejected the idea that they were disadvantaged compared to women. However, many expressed strong criticism of gender legislation, which they saw as creating unfair advantages for women. Importantly, this criticism was directed more at policies than at women themselves. This helps shed light on a key ambiguity in the quantitative data, where some men report feeling discriminated against without clearly specifying the source of that perception.

The individualism of neoliberal feminism, along with its distrust of state and collective action, aligns with participants' opposition to gender quotas, their preference for harsher sentences for sex offenders and their broader scepticism about the impact of gender policies. This distrust of political action was also widespread, with participants expressing negative views not only of politics in general but also of feminism as promoted by parties and politicians. Across the board, even among those most supportive of feminism, it was often seen as conflictual, divisive and inauthentic.

This framework helps make sense of the three paradoxes. Firstly, the link between feminism and the political establishment – especially in a country like Spain, which has pioneered many gender-equality laws – helps explain why young people's dissatisfaction with the establishment also translates into distrust of feminism. This may account for why both young men and women are shifting to the right, both politically and in their views on feminism. Secondly, if neoliberal feminism is becoming more prominent, it is unsurprising that broad claims about gender equality resonate with young women, while more progressive, state-led and outcome-focused policies are met with scepticism. Thirdly, many young men, despite accepting key principles of gender equality, oppose policies they see as favouring women at their expense, particularly as they do not perceive themselves as clearly disadvantaged relative to women.

Having outlined this framework, the next sections analyse the focus-group discussions, starting with young people's general views on politics, before examining their perceptions of gender equality, their understanding of feminism, their views on the situation of young men and the types of gender policies they support.

2.1 Young people distrust politics

Among all participants, without exception, there was a strongly negative view of politics and politicians. Distrust and criticism of corruption were widespread, with one female participant

even calling them “thieves” (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group). Politicians were described as “self-serving”, “corrupt” and unwilling to address people's problems.³⁶ They were seen as contributing to social polarisation, prioritising their own or their party's interests over those of society as a whole.³⁷ This distrust also extended to politics more broadly. Participants expressed frustration with the politicisation of many aspects of social life, and describing something as “political” was generally viewed negatively.

Regarding the challenges Spanish politics faces, polarisation and corruption were widely mentioned. Economic precarity and the cost of living were also widely raised, and other topics, such as public health, were mentioned more often by left-leaning participants, whereas house squatting and high taxes were mentioned more often by right-leaning participants. However, the other main socio-economic challenge mentioned by virtually all participants was housing. Participants were pessimistic regarding housing; they felt that the housing market was deteriorating in terms of affordability and availability, and that little was being done to address it. One participant put it like this: “I think young people have very little future. Even though I earn good money, I can't buy a house as my parents did, and on my own it's impossible. Rent is very high, and I can't move out either” (Elena, Female, 20, aircraft mechanic, female-only-group).³⁸

Interestingly, when asked about their personal situation, participants said they were either doing well (some even regarding housing) or were optimistic about their future. However, when asked about society in general, a sense of decline or pessimism was common. One participant said:

“I'd say things are going well for me personally. It could always be better, obviously, but on a social level, I think we're in a really bad place. And even if your personal situation is fine, the social situation ends up affecting you.”

(Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group)³⁹

When asked to compare their generation's situation to that of previous generations, opinions diverged. Some argued that young people today were better off because of higher educational levels, greater internationalisation and mobility, and technological advancement.⁴⁰ Others argued that it was worse and referred to housing costs, the cost of living and job instability.⁴¹ It is important to note that even those who defended that previous generations had it worse overall also agreed that the economic situation of young people today is worse than that of older generations, reflecting the empirical data on the subject.⁴² As one participant put it: "We are the generation that's going to live worse. Even if the minimum wage goes up, it doesn't compensate for the current cost of living" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). In brief, politics was viewed extremely negatively and was closely linked to a deep sense of social pessimism about the economic prospects facing young people.⁴³

2.2 Have we achieved gender equality?

Regarding gender, it was striking to find that participants, either male or female, generally felt they were not discriminated against or given fewer opportunities because of their gender. When asked directly, one participant in the mixed group said "no, at least in the jobs I have been in. Men and women earn the same and you were hired regardless of whether you were a man or a woman" (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group), which was agreed upon by the other female and male participants.⁴⁴ Another participant stated that "I think we have more or less the same opportunities" (Patricia, female, 29, PP, nurse, mixed group).

Moreover, there was a clearly positive view of the advancements made in this field among all participants. The sense of progress and of being close to achieving equality was shared by everyone: "I think that in Spain, things have become more equal" (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group). Temporality and generational dynamics played a major role in explaining this position. All participants agreed that there had been significant

gender inequality in the past and that older generations were much more sexist than younger ones. However, when asked about their generation, sentiments were mainly positive, ranging from the belief that gender equality had already been achieved to the view that it was very close to being achieved among the young. One participant stated, "I do not think we have achieved gender equality yet, but it is getting closer and closer. [...] I think that in general, with younger people, equality is more or less being achieved in household tasks, for example" (Carlos, male, 24, Podemos, engineer, mixed group).⁴⁵ One participant said, "I do see quite a lot of equality among people my age" (Sergio, male, 29, PSOE, receptionist, mixed group) and another agreed, "I do see quite a lot of equality now" (Patricia, female, 29, PP, nurse, mixed group).

As older generations dominate the workplace and politics, respondents discussed their influence. For example, one male participant mentioned that he knew an older boss in his company who did not want to hire women in case they became pregnant,⁴⁶ while others argued that they had not seen anything like that in their workplaces, particularly after the new law equating maternity and paternity leave in Spain.⁴⁷

This element of temporality was also reflected in the view that time was needed for recently implemented policies to take effect.⁴⁸ It was mentioned, for example, that the law equating paternity and maternity leave was still very new (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group). Moreover, time was also needed for the newer, more gender-equal generations to reach positions of power, form families or educate their own children to see the full impact of the changes taking place.⁴⁹ As one female participant put it: "when young people reach the top, the problem will no longer exist, but the people today in important positions still have the conservative ideas of when they were young" (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group). Thus, there was a keen awareness of the temporal and generational dimension of gender equality and of the progress being made in this regard.⁵⁰ Because time is thought to work in favour of gender equality, the general attitude was very optimistic.

When prompted on specific issues or nuances, participants identified a number of gender inequalities and gender differences, although the latter were not always interpreted as inequalities. The clearest example of gender inequality was gender violence. Regarding violence, street harassment and feelings of safety, women said they were clearly at a disadvantage compared with men. This was, by far, the topic where the clearest gender inequality appeared and was agreed upon by both men and women. One participant stated that

“Often when I go alone, people say things to me or a car pulls up next to me, and it scares me. That does not happen when my partner goes with me. I do not do anything, and he is not a big guy, but I do notice the difference there.”

(Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group)⁵¹

No male participant denied or questioned this, and many men mentioned this as a significant issue. However, this was the only topic where such a clear female-disadvantaged positioning appeared.

Regarding the workplace, there was a broad sense among all that they were paid the same. One of the female participants stated that “in all my jobs I’ve earned the same as my male co-workers” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). If the gender pay gap was to be understood as “unequal pay for equal jobs”, female participants did not believe they earned less than men or that that was common practice.

Most of the gender pay gap was attributed to men and women holding different types of jobs. One participant said:

“Men tend to work more in careers that are better valued and better paid. From a young age, girls are pushed toward care roles and boys toward technology. And in my company, in the tech industry, high-level positions are held by men.”

(Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group)

while others agreed:

“I think the problem is that high-level positions are held mostly by men. It’s an issue of opportunities. It’s not that a woman earns less for doing the same, but that it’s much harder to reach high-level positions if you’re a woman.”

(Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group)

Maternity leave was also mentioned:

“And then there’s the issue of maternity. Even though parental leave has been equalised, it still affects women more. Usually, the person who leaves work to take care of the kids is the woman. And when she returns, she has lost years of promotion opportunities.”

(Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group)

Some differences in treatment in the workplace were also brought up: “In my job I earn the same, but they don’t treat me the same”, said one of the respondents who worked in a heavily male-dominated profession – aircraft mechanics. She mentioned examples of comments or nicknames she had received and argued that “since day one I’ve been ‘the one with the big boobs in the hangar’, [...] it’s constant sexism” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).⁵²

However, a key result from the analysis was the clear self-confidence of female participants in the workplace. This same participant argued that

“I’m in a job where most people are men, and no one has cut my wings. I could have gone to university, started working, etc. Nobody told me ‘you can’t come in here’. I’m one of only seven women, and I’m still here [...] No one stops me from getting promoted if I want to.”

(Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group)

Other female respondents also alluded to their self-confidence. She argued that compared with her

male classmates, “she was much better than them”, because while she “went to Switzerland to work to improve language skills”, “the men were playing Fortnite [a videogame]” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group). This was also accompanied by a strong belief in meritocracy, as another participant stated, “I think I have more because I have done things at just the right time by chance. Everyone said, ‘how lucky’, but maybe it is not luck, maybe I have worked hard for it” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).

This confidence was also applied to overcoming sexism:

“Okay, I have to put up with comments from three guys out of 500, which I shouldn’t have to, but that will happen in many places [...] and I earn the same whether they’re sexist toward me or not. And I can move up if I work for it, sexist or not.”

(Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group)

As another participant put it: “I think I won’t have that problem, and that I will be able to have my home, my job... because I’m going to put the work in. I think now it depends a bit more on each person, not gender” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group). While sexism existed, it simply required “guts” and “balls” as one of the female participants argued (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). Coupled with the statements that women did not feel disadvantaged in the workplace, it paints a picture of increasingly confident young women. It also echoes right-wing leaders’ “iron lady” version of feminism.⁵³

These statements show the strong presence of neoliberal or “girlboss” feminism.⁵⁴ Because this vision focuses on the individual, not the structures, it is also compatible with a high degree of normalisation of gender differences and gendered treatment among participants.⁵⁵ If sexism is common under patriarchy, people normalise it in their daily lives, under the “boys will be boys” narratives.⁵⁶ As one participant stated, “you will have to deal with it everywhere, that some men sexualise you, but because some people are

like that” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group).⁵⁷ Moreover, some participants clearly worked under the assumption that some gender differences were normal. One participant explicitly stated that

“I feel that gender equality will never be exactly equal because we are not exactly equal, but I feel that gender equality is about women having the same dignity as men – and I think that is the case. [...] Sometimes there are differences [...] not as an imposition, but as an observable trend. As long as everyone is comfortable with what they do, it’s not a problem.”

(Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group)

Thus, neoliberal visions on gender were very popular.

To a certain degree, the rise of neoliberal feminism might be explained as providing a framework for people to make sense of some big structural changes in gender relations. Participants’ observations mostly reflected these developments. Women did not experience any form of direct discrimination, nor did they think that there was significant gender inequality in their generation.⁵⁹ This might reflect positive transformations as young women do better in schools than boys, who tend to have a higher dropout rate;⁶⁰ attend university in greater numbers;⁶¹ and the gender gap has equalised in Spain among the youngest.⁶² At the same time, participants also reflected the many persisting gender inequalities. They mentioned maternity and working in different sectors as the main drivers of the gender pay gap, which again fits with the scientific evidence pointing to occupational segregation and the childcare penalty as the main reasons to explain differences between men and women.⁶³

Lastly, all participants were concerned with gender violence, which was identified as the single biggest issue of gender inequality.⁶⁴

The focus-group discussions indicated that the inequalities that remain are often more subtle and are perceived as stemming from individual choices, making them easier to legitimise and accommodate within neoliberal feminist narratives. Progressive forms of feminism have greatly focused on the

genesis of those individual preferences, and on making the stereotypes and social expectations that produce them visible. The left-right distinction among participants became more visible precisely in discussing the weight that gender stereotypes have today. When discussing maternity, for example, some argued that women leaving the workforce to take care of the kid was influenced by gender stereotypes (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group) to which others agreed but argued that it was ultimately “each person’s life choices” and that “it was not something the company forces you to do” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).⁶⁵

Also, when discussing different rates in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers or construction work, the more left-leaning male participants stated that

“I think they help because many girls are still discouraged from pursuing tech fields in secondary school. [...] not officially, I mean socially. The environment they grow up in. The fact that we have 90% [female] nurses and 90% IT men isn’t random. It reflects social norms.”

(Daniel, male, 24, Sumar, student, male-only group)

While the more right-leaning disagreed:

“I don’t think the education system in Spain tells girls not to study tech subjects, though [...] I think nowadays everyone really has the opportunity to study whatever they want. ‘Opportunity’ in quotation marks, because obviously your grades matter, and there are other conditions, but in general, people do what they want.”

(Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group)

Those same participants rejected any biological cause for gender differences and attributed them solely to individual choices. Thus, the main ideological difference was found in the role of social norms impacting individual behaviour.

In summary, while neoliberal feminism is not alone and cohabitates with many other gender discourses, the focus groups’ interventions displayed a high degree of presence of neoliberal feminism. This is worrisome, as neoliberal feminism is more blind to structural injustices and hinders feminist political mobilisation, as the next section shows.

2.3 Less sexist, but also less feminist

Participants were asked to define feminism, and two commonalities emerged. Firstly, all participants, without exception, defined feminism as gender equality.⁶⁶ Moreover, all understood feminism as the more political or activist dimension of gender equality.⁶⁷ However, the connotations associated with this definition were where the nuances emerged. Some female participants mentioned that feminism was often confused with “hembrism” (the notion of female superiority) or with “feminazism” and resented that.⁶⁸ However, there was general agreement that feminism is a political term, associated with conflict, politicians and polarisation. This prompted many responses, from both female and male participants, that distinguished between “real” and “bad” feminism, or between the feminism “from before” and “of now”.⁶⁹

For right-wing male participants, feminism was seen as a purely electoral strategy used to win votes, implementing misguided policies that were, in their view, detrimental to “real gender equality”. Distrust of feminist politicians was high. One participant said, “the politicians who call themselves the most feminist have made laws that freed rapists, or had abusers in their own parties. That makes people lose trust” (Diego, male, 29, Vox, consultant, male-only group).⁷⁰

For many women, this distinction was also present. One participant argued that, given that equality is the same as feminism, there is no need to use the word feminism: “Why does it have to be called ‘feminism’? To start fights. Or to cause confusion” (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group) and another said that the word was “very political, in a negative sense” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group).⁷¹ These

results mirror the survey data on the negative views on political expressions of feminism.

The women made three sets of criticisms of feminism. The first was obviously to politicians:

"I think politicians talk a lot about these issues and pay lip service to gender equality, but then, when it comes to the important issues, they do nothing. For example, there are a lot of gang rapes, horrible things done to women on the streets, in Madrid and everywhere else. And that is not punished as severely. They invest a lot more in advertising and saying 'let's be feminists, let's do things right.'"

(Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group)

The second concerned the perceived hypocrisy of some feminists, in both public and private life. One participant mentioned a female friend who, while claiming to be a feminist, often commented on her weight and did not treat her well.⁷² The third criticism focused on the radical element of the movement, particularly the more extreme versions of feminism that, in their view, had reached a point where they "hated men". One participant said that "current feminism is very tainted by extremist groups and by (postureo) performative activism" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).⁷³ There were differing views on which forms of feminism were most dominant. However, most agreed that while "extremist feminism is the minority, it's the one most visible" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).⁷⁴ Distinctions between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusive feminism were also debated but did not form a central aspect of the "real/current" feminism distinction. This stands in contrast to much public discussion revolving around this issue as the main dividing factor of Spanish feminism in recent years.⁷⁵

When asked if they would identify as feminists, all participants responded affirmatively. While some were clearly in favour of feminism, "the [feminist] fight still is necessary" (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group), many participants – both men and women – qualified their answer by saying they only identified with "real" feminism. They

also all agreed with the aim of gender equality.⁷⁶ Thus, while all declare themselves feminists in general terms, they all had strong criticism of feminism in practical terms. As one participant put it, "the ideal is good, but the adaptation is not entirely good" (Sergio, male, 29, PSOE, receptionist, mixed group).

The strong presence of neoliberal feminism can help explain these statements, as it formally defends gender equality but without the type of state and collective action advocated by other forms of feminism. As a vanguard movement, feminism attempts to push both men and women in a progressive direction, challenging deeply rooted patriarchy and gender norms. It is this push that many participants feel as forceful or as an imposition. As one participant stated, "in the pursuit of equality and the fight for it, people force it so much that the way they impose it creates confrontation" (Sergio, male, 29, PSOE, receptionist, mixed group). It might also be under this light that the temporal aspect of feminism should be read. Participants were aware of the progress and the time it took for this progress to become visible and take effect; thus, there is probably also an unease with the speed at which feminism demands advancements,⁷⁷ a common reaction to any type of social change and progress.

Moreover, neoliberal feminism is compatible with the starkly negative view participants held of politics, as shown in the section above. Participants held such a negative view of politics that anything associated with it tended to be perceived negatively. As feminism is mainly seen as a political phenomenon, suspicion towards it is high. The authenticity of politicians' feminist claims is questioned because distrust of politicians is so high. While all agree with the ideal of gender equality, they did not trust the actors bringing it about. This was coupled with low expectations of social change, as participants frequently pointed to the perceived failures of feminist policy, particularly the recent consent law, which became highly controversial because of its unintended effect of reducing prison sentences for several sexual offenders. The combination of distrust towards political actors advocating gender equality and scepticism that policies can bring about meaningful change helps to explain the general

demobilisation and pessimism among participants. In turn, this may lead young people to favour more individual forms of advancement, such as those proposed by neoliberal feminism.

2.4 Men against political feminism

A lot of the scholarship on the radicalisation of young men argues that they are increasingly showing sexist attitudes, even more than older generations, and that they are resentful towards young women due to dating and labour market competition.⁷⁸ The analysis, however, showed that most men supported gender equality and even rejected some of the tenets of modern sexism. Men's critical positions were related to certain gender laws and the political expression of feminism, not women in general.

Most male participants thought that, beyond specific issues like older sexist generations and gender violence, both men and women were treated the same, particularly in the workplace. No men mentioned feeling discriminated against or disadvantaged for being male.

Initially, all men disagreed with the statement that gender-equality policies were disadvantaging them. Some male participants did not perceive their usefulness at a time when gender equality (at least among the young) was either achieved or on the verge of being achieved.⁷⁹ However, when prompted, several men – particularly those who identified as right wing – did mention in critical terms the differential treatment of gender policies in some cases. For example, some participants criticised gender quotas: “I apply for a job and deserve it based on merits and then lose it just because I'm a man, I would not think that makes sense, and that would annoy me” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).⁸⁰

Different treatment was also mentioned concerning gender-violence laws. In Spain, since the approval of the Organic Act 1/2004 on Comprehensive Protection Measures against Gender Violence, an accusation of gender violence against a man can lead to his detention for up to 72 hours if the police

deem it appropriate. Some male participants raised this example of differential treatment as evidence of gender inequality.⁸¹ However, some left-wing men argued that it was necessary, given the scale of gender violence as a social problem. Some men delegitimised the fear of false accusations (“I think that's an irrational fear [...] false accusations aren't a real problem statistically” (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group))⁸² while others acknowledged them but still thought the system was necessary: “the same system that causes [false accusations against men] also prevents worse cases against women” (Daniel, male, 24, Sumar, student, male-only group).⁸³ More right-wing men disagreed, considering that the effects were devastating for men: “even without proof, you're already condemned in people's eyes. It follows you everywhere, socially, professionally, personally. Once word spreads, you're done” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).⁸⁴

Regarding the dating market, all participants agreed that there had been an increase in women's expectations and demands. From the men's perspective, there was also agreement that this had not particularly affected them.⁸⁵ Some right-wing men referred to the concept of “dating inflation”, meaning that women who were “medium pretty” now sought more attractive men, whereas previously they might have chosen “medium pretty” men.⁸⁶ Baldness and height were also mentioned as traits women were less attracted to.⁸⁷ However, the size of this “dating inflation” was generally considered small. Men, even far-right supporters, framed this primarily as an individual issue rather than a social problem, which was consistent with the neoliberal and individualist perspectives held by all participants.⁸⁸ Men also agreed that they preferred certain types of women and held expectations of them, so it seemed reasonable that this would work both ways.⁸⁹ Left-wing men criticised the “incel narrative”.⁹⁰

Only one male participant exposed a clear male-victim mentality. He said that “outside the workplace, men are disadvantaged in some issues” (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group). He argued that the dating market was very difficult, that he was currently in a problematic relationship with

a woman he felt was below his standards, and that women tended to reject men like him.⁹¹ While this aligns with the broader pattern linking incel culture to the far right; it was only a single case and not even from a far-right voter.

The women's perspective on men revolved around rejecting the idea that men were disadvantaged. There were brief mentions of situations in which men were entering previously female-dominated areas, such as cleaning or nurseries, where they could face challenges. Still, these were regarded as very minor issues.⁹² Women also rejected common complaints from men.⁹³ They argued that this increase in expectations for male partners was very mild and simply about wanting men who were not "murderers".⁹⁴ While several women complained about the "man-hating" tendencies of the most radical versions of feminism, they also had little sympathy for men's complaints, particularly regarding gender violence. One participant said:

"When that 'hatred' toward men is talked about, many times it's not talking about men in general. When people say, 'men kill', we're not saying 'every man is a murderer'. But it is a fact that gender-based murders are committed by men. Of course, some take it as a personal attack, but it's not; it's a statistical reality."

(Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group)

Some women also argued that feminism had benefited men because it offered them "more freedom to be who they are", as well as benefiting "economically, because they no longer have to support the whole family on their own" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).⁹⁶ One participant mentioned that, nowadays, more men are expressing their feelings.⁹⁷

Some participants also complained about the antifeminism of younger people. This was the only note of pessimism in what was an overall optimistic assessment of the advancements made in gender equality. It was noted that very young men (children and very early 20s) might be unravelling some of these advances; "I do think that after all that had

been achieved, we are going backwards with the next generations" (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group).⁹⁸ Another said: "they're very radical people, but radical at the level of fascism. It's not just that they're conservative: they're really radical" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). This was blamed on social media: "I believe that there are 16 year olds who are very influenced by far-right rhetoric, mainly due to social media" (Carlos, male, 24, Podemos, engineer, mixed group). Thus, although the participants did not experience the gender divide in their lives, they believed even younger generations were experiencing it.

In summary, male grievances against women were not particularly evident in the focus groups. Only one male expressed it, while other male participants, even those who were far right, denied it explicitly. The complaints concerned explicit instances of differential treatment (gender quotas) and political feminism. To a point, this evidence contrasts with narratives that stress the loss of male privilege, the increasing sexism of young men or competition in the labour market from increasingly educated young women.⁹⁹

One possible explanation is that social desirability effects prevent men from expressing those more explicit forms of sexism against women and that criticising some key gender laws allowed them to express their frustration. Given that admitting they are losing on the dating or labour market would be shameful, it is on political feminism that these criticisms can be expressed.¹⁰⁰ Another complementary explanation is that neoliberal and individual understandings of gender equality are very present among men. Young men would see young women as equals in the labour market, as equals in the dating market and, thus, for right-wing young men, positive discrimination policies would violate meritocratic principles in a situation where they were not needed.

2.5 Against gender quotas

When discussing gender policies, the focus was overwhelmingly on two policies seen in negative

terms. While other gender policies were mentioned in passing in a more positive light (e.g., equating fathers' parental leave with that of mothers'), these received virtually no attention compared to gender quotas and gender-violence laws.¹⁰¹

Regarding quotas, there was a general rejection of the policies. Right-wing men were the most opposed, arguing that quotas undermined merit, unfairly disadvantaged men and denigrated women by treating them as less capable.¹⁰² One argued that "I think [gender quotas] are a mistake. They're not based on merit; they treat women as a minority in need of help, when really the point should be to hire based on ability, regardless of gender" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).¹⁰³ Some left-wing men defended them in some cases, such as cases of physical exams for the police.¹⁰⁴

However, quotas were also criticised by many women, who argued that the best people, regardless of gender, should be chosen for the highest positions: "In the end, it boils down to whoever is qualified should lead. It does not matter if they are a man or a woman" (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).¹⁰⁵ This may be explained by the neoliberal feminist position that was very evident among the female participants.¹⁰⁶ Some more left-leaning male and female participants defended quotas because they enhance merit, given that women are sometimes not selected due to gender discrimination. However, this argument was not widely accepted by other participants, both left and right wing. No one defended the policy based on representation; the meritocratic ideal was clearly dominant among all participants.

The second issue debated was gender violence, where there was a widespread sense of impunity for sex offenders among all participants, both female and male.¹⁰⁷ Some female participants recounted personal stories,¹⁰⁸ mentioned fears of not being listened to by judges and police officers,¹⁰⁹ and recalled the recent consequences of Spain's gender-violence law, where nearly a thousand prisoners convicted of rape or sexual harassment unexpectedly had their sentences reduced and were released.¹¹⁰ Men also mentioned impunity regarding

false accusations of women, a hot topic in Spain since the 2006 law. Some male participants also shared personal stories of false accusations.¹¹¹

When asked how to address the issue of gender violence, some suggestions included better economic support for victims and faster trials. The differential treatment of men and women under the law was debated. As seen in the previous section, some men justified it as necessary, while others opposed it, and the same happened with women; while some women justified it, others, while accepting the fact that many more women suffered violence than men, felt uneasy with the unequal treatment of men under the law.¹¹²

However, the clearest proposal that emerged was tougher sentences. This was supported by all participants, across all genders and ideologies.¹¹³ The desire for more punitive policies and harsher sentences as a deterrent against gender violence and *acosadores* was explicitly expressed by everyone.¹¹⁴ One participant said: "improving the monitoring of rapists, toughening penalties, etc. Everyone should agree on that, regardless of their political party, because these are common issues" (Sergio, male, 29, PSOE, receptionist, mixed group). They were also, however, expressed by several men concerning false accusations: "in general, if you toughen penalties, you reduce crime. So, I'd make penalties tougher, for false reports, for rape, for everything" (Óscar, male, 22, PSOE, student, male-only group).¹¹⁵

Thus, the two most prominent gender policies participants could think of – gender quotas and differential treatment under gender-violence laws – while supported by some under some circumstances, were generally opposed by most participants, both male and female. This finding points to an opposition to the feminist policies put forward by the government and further supports a very strong opposition to political feminism among the participants.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Main results

The quantitative and qualitative analyses have shown that, while attitudinal differences based on gender do exist – young women are slightly more progressive on some social and economic issues – the largest gaps appear in gender attitudes. However, even in this sphere, both quantitative and qualitative analyses found that these differences were not particularly large. Moreover, it is both genders that are turning right and declining in their feminist identification. The story of what is happening among Spanish youth is probably less about gender differences and more about what young people share: a deep distrust of politicians and the political establishment; widespread concern about economic precarity and housing; and the strong presence of neoliberal and individualised forms of feminism.

While all participants expressed support for gender equality – and generally associated it with feminism – support for feminism as a term was more fragmented and came more strongly from young women. Feminism was also frequently linked to the political sphere. As a result, and in the Spanish context of young people's broader distrust of politics, feminism as a concept was often perceived as polarising and conflictual, including by some of its supporters. This led many participants to distinguish between "real" feminism and "current" feminism.

Moreover, most participants argued that, among young people, gender equality – except in relation to gender violence – had already been achieved, particularly in the workplace. An understanding of gender equality as the absence of restrictions on individual freedom was coupled with strong beliefs in individual merit and a lack of trust in political

action. This combination often led to negative views of gender quotas.

The picture that emerges is one in which citizens expect very little from feminist politics. It is not that they reject feminism outright, nor that they are staunch antifeminists; rather, they simply do not trust political feminism. As young people disengage from collective feminist mobilisation, they turn to more individualised forms of feminism, such as neoliberal or "girlboss" feminism. While gender opinions are extremely varied and complex, neoliberal, meritocratic and or "girlboss" feminist tropes and arguments were found to be quite prevalent across both genders.

3.2 The dangers of neoliberal feminism

The strong presence of neoliberal feminism is concerning for many reasons. The first is that it is more blind to structural inequalities than other forms of feminism. In terms of representation, "girlboss" feminism focuses on women's presence at the top of politics, business and other fields; however, it is less concerned with gender parity at organisational or societal levels. In terms of the causes of gender inequality, this type of feminism is also less able to critique patriarchy. It is mainly focused on criticising explicit barriers to women's progress; however, given its emphasis on freedom and individual choice, it is unable to critique the implicit patriarchal stereotypes, values and norms that underpin those individual choices. In that sense, neoliberal feminism normalises a great deal of patriarchy.

The second reason is that neoliberal feminism supports economic neoliberal policies. While it supports women, its aim is for women to become rich and enjoy that wealth, which generally means supporting lower taxes, austerity measures and fewer regulations. These policies, in turn, deepen

the wealth and income decline of young people, weaken collective bargaining power, and worsen the economic problems of the young.

The third reason is that neoliberal feminism is much more difficult to identify and criticise than the most explicit forms of antifeminism or tradwife content. Neoliberal feminism is dangerous precisely because it is so close to progressive forms of feminism in its support for women, female representation and critique of gender inequality. It is much subtler than overt forms of antifeminism and, thus, potentially more powerful.

The last reason is that neoliberal feminism is deeply corrosive to collective and state action. The neoliberal element of this type of feminism is wary of state intervention and of policies such as gender quotas or special protections for women, as these treat women as a collective rather than as individuals. However, these policies have been crucial in advancing gender equality. Criticising gender policies at a time when politicians are generally viewed extremely negatively can hinder state-led political action.

Moreover, the individualistic aspect of neoliberal feminism is suspicious of collective action and organisation, preferring individual advancement instead. This is problematic because feminist mobilisation has been crucial in advancing gender equality. The current gender backlash is not only produced by explicit antifeminist forces but also by the demobilisation of feminist women: as the analysis showed, identification with feminism has fallen, despite broad acceptance of gender-equality principles. Individualised feminism fails to re-energise the feminist movement and does not provide enough strength to influence either society or public policy. Therefore, neoliberal feminism should be a major source of concern for progressive forces.

3.3 Why is neoliberal feminism so powerful?

To properly push back against neoliberal feminism, it is important to understand why it has become so popular. It is not simply a matter of discursive power, but it is driven by powerful structural transformations. While a full causal account of the emergence and growing prominence of neoliberal, or “girlboss”, feminism lies beyond the scope of this policy study, the analysis points to at least four major structural transformations: the advancement of women; rising economic precarity; increasing individualism; and growing distrust of political actors.

Firstly, structural changes such as the increasing incorporation of women into the workforce, alongside gender policies addressing violence, parental leave and representation, have made women in Europe increasingly economically independent of marriage and men. Thus, many young women’s embrace of neoliberal feminism may reflect this growing financial empowerment.

Secondly, this advancement has taken place in a context of rising inequalities, expanding precarity, and declining incomes and wealth among younger generations. Young women are becoming more economically independent at a time when overall access to a stable income, wealth accumulation and housing is deteriorating. In other words, they are gaining independence at a moment when that independence is less materially valuable. This paradox was strongly reflected in the focus groups. It generates deep dissatisfaction not only with the economic system, but also with the gap between the expectations of feminist transformation and its actual outcomes. While feminism aimed to enable women to “gain the privileges of men”, in an increasingly precarious economy, those privileges themselves have diminished in value. This may help explain the frequent distinction made between “real”, “current” or “radical” feminism. Although feminist ideals remain widely shared, contemporary realities often fail to meet these expectations, fostering scepticism toward feminism as a political and collective project.

The third factor relates to the broader process of social atomisation experienced in Europe over the past 50 years. Union membership, party affiliation and participation in civil society have all declined, while political engagement has increasingly taken the form of sporadic protests or social media campaigns rather than sustained collective action. Moreover, deindustrialisation has led to the expansion of precarious service-sector jobs that are more difficult to unionise. This growing individualisation of the labour market may also shape the attitudes of young people, including young women. The “I can do it myself” mindset observed in the focus groups may therefore reflect not only a sense of empowerment, but also an adaptive response to a context characterised by weaker social organisations, declining union presence and reduced collective bargaining power.

Finally, the analysis highlights a growing distrust of politicians and political institutions. The gap between political elites and citizens has widened over recent decades, reaching a peak in countries such as Spain following the 2008 financial crisis. As noted in previous FEPS research, the consequences of this crisis have yet to be fully resolved, and negative perceptions of politicians remain widespread.¹¹⁶ This, in turn, affects attitudes toward gender-equality policies. Such distrust may help explain the appeal of individualised forms of feminism, which often criticise state-led gender policies and instead emphasise personal agency and individual action.

In summary, the simultaneous advancement of women, increasing economic precarity among younger generations, rising social atomisation and a deepening crisis of political representation together create favourable conditions for neoliberal and individualised forms of feminism to gain traction among young people.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Discourse

The **main recommendation** from this policy study is to pay attention to the presence of neoliberal feminism among the young. While much attention is devoted to the most explicit forms of the gender backlash (far right, “tradwives” etc.), neoliberal feminism should also occupy the attention of progressive forces. The pitfalls of neoliberal feminism should be made apparent, and the structural element of gender inequalities should be stressed more. A key reason why many gender norms are normalised is that they appear to be freely chosen by individuals. Stressing the context that explains those choices is crucial. It is equally important to recognise in public debate that many of the advances in gender equality that young people value today were achieved through feminist mobilisation, public policy and collective action. Reconnecting with this longer tradition of progressive and collective feminist struggle can help sustain a more inclusive and solidaristic vision of gender equality.

The **second recommendation** is to broaden the focus beyond the challenges facing young men and their rightward shift to include young women as well. Mainstream media narratives often place particular emphasis on young men, yet the broader rightward shift among young people in Spain points to the need for an approach that addresses both young men and young women. This also requires engaging critically with the gender norms and patriarchal assumptions that young women may hold, including those that shape their views of masculinity, their expectations of men and the wider social norms they may themselves reproduce. This should be approached as a shared and inclusive task, involving both young men and young women, while underlining the risks associated with a return to more regressive gender norms.

The **third recommendation** is to rethink the place of masculinity in progressive discourses. Advocates of gender equality must offer a clear and appealing alternative to the far right’s nostalgic ideal of traditional masculinity. While feminism does have a positive vision for masculinity,¹¹⁷ this has not been translated into public debates, which often focus on critiquing patriarchy without pairing that critique with a hopeful, constructive model of masculinity.¹¹⁸ If this vision is not articulated from the left, young men may be more likely to buy into the far-right masculinist narratives, simply because they are the only ones offering a positive vision of their identity. Moreover, precarity and uncertainty may increase the appeal of more traditional gender roles. This is visible in a wide range of spaces, such as video games, gyms and personal development, where neoliberal and sexist narratives dominate. However, as seen in the analysis, young men are supportive of many gender-equality positions and are less sexist than older men. Antifeminist narratives have been successful at critiquing current gender policies but not yet at convincing young men to hate women or to embrace sexism. Antifeminist discourses are still relatively superficial. Thus, there is still ample scope to win them back to progressive positions. Progressive forces should highlight real examples of men who embody progressive, inclusive forms of masculinity and enter into realms beyond politics to offer this vision. These examples also need to be visible in the cultural sphere and in everyday reference points. This is not only about formal political messaging but also about cultural presence: the ability to shape recognisable references, narratives and symbols across media, sports, games and workplaces.

The **fourth recommendation** is to retrieve an antiestablishment strategy for feminism by treating antifeminist narratives as the new status quo. These discourses, despite not being internalised fully by most young people, are extremely present in young people’s feeds and content consumption.¹¹⁹ These

are not fringe discourses. While online visibility should not automatically be taken as a reflection of broader social reality, it can gradually influence which issues and framings become politically salient. Its dominance may, over time, contribute to a more negative climate around gender equality and feminism. Thus, feminism should reassert an antiestablishment stance that criticises the new status quo discourses.¹²⁰ This way, it can connect with the wave of antiestablishment sentiment present in Europe and become more successful.

These four recommendations all concern progressives' gender discourse. However, the analysis also showed that young people's distrust was deeply related to economic precarity and the housing market. Moreover, most do not believe that a significant transformation will come from gender policy. Thus, it may be the case that an indirect strategy – one that does not speak directly about gender – is an important, complimentary way to garner young people's support on gender issues. A platform centred on housing and affordability would clearly resonate with many young people. As Mamdani's campaign in New York City showed, young men are not necessarily unreachable: he was able to gain the support of more than 80% of young women, as well as the majority of young men.¹²¹ This was not achieved by appealing directly to young men or by focusing on gender equality, but by prioritising an economically left-wing agenda. Refocusing on the affordability crisis and offering viable solutions should therefore be the Spanish government's priority.

4.2 Policy

The analyses showed that the power of individualistic or neoliberal forms of feminism did not come just from discourse but from structural conditions that made it more appealing. Thus, it is necessary to address those as well.

Addressing the economic precarity of young people is primordial. The following three key policies could help address this issue:

- Make housing accessible and affordable to younger generations by investing massively in social housing and implementing housing market regulations that lower prices.¹²²
- Increase the incomes of young generations by strengthening the Youth Guarantee, banning unpaid internships¹²³ and increasing the minimum salary.
- Redistribute wealth from older generations to younger generations by establishing stronger wealth taxes and rolling out a universal inheritance that would provide young adults with a one-off grant to develop entrepreneurial or socially beneficial projects.¹²⁴

Concerning gender policies, it is important to continue enacting policies that enhance gender equality, as it is a policy goal supported by all participants. One particularly important field is that of gender violence, where all participants agreed on the need for tougher sentences, despite substantial evidence questioning their effectiveness.¹²⁵ Addressing this issue effectively from a progressive perspective is, thus, crucial:

- Increase support services for victims of gender violence¹²⁶ so that the feeling of abandonment expressed by participants is tackled.
- Accelerate judicial processing of gender-violence cases¹²⁷ so that the feeling of impunity of sex offenders exposed by all participants is reduced.
- Enact the EU pay transparency directive in companies¹²⁸ to reduce pay disparities between genders and/or any impression of unfair treatment by any of the genders.

- Expand flexible work options to promote gender equality and ease pressures on parents, allowing more young people to have children.¹²⁹
- Introduce a universal child allowance to ensure that child-rearing does not require disproportionate effort from parents, particularly mothers.¹³⁰ This would enable more young people to have children.

Lastly, it is important to note that policy itself is not enough. The growing social atomisation that enables antifeminist and neoliberal feminist discourses to flourish needs to be addressed:

- Reinforce feminist movements and organisations by creating environments for social interaction, activism and long-term engagement that can overcome periods of antifeminist dominance.¹³¹
- Reinforce union membership, civil society organisations and party mobilisation to combat social atomisation among young people.¹³²
- Heavily regulate social media platforms and generative artificial intelligence models to limit the dominance of addictive, conflict-driven and far-right content.¹³³

ENDNOTES

- 1 Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024) "A new global gender divide is emerging". *Financial Times*, 26 January; Nennstiel, R. and A. Hudde (2025) "Is there a growing gender divide among young adults in regard to ideological left–right self-placement? Evidence from 32 European countries". *European Sociological Review*, 6(41): 862-883. DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcaf021
- 2 Carbonell, J. (2025) "From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti-feminist backlash". European Policy Centre, 9 April.
- 3 Mundi, C., Á. González Roldán and M. Córdoba (2025) "Repeal the 19th', la campaña ultra en EE UU que pide en redes sociales que las mujeres no puedan votar". *El País*, 18 November.
- 4 Belknap, E. and S. Turnbull-Dugarte (2025) "Most British young men reject the far right". UK in a Changing Europe, 30 October; J. Carbonell (2026) "A room of one's own is all you can afford: Why young women move to the far right". Discussion paper. European Policy Centre, 5 March.
- 5 Carbonell, J. (2026) "A room of one's own is all you can afford: Why young women move to the far right".
- 6 Nennstiel, R. and A. Hudde (2025) "Is there a growing gender divide among young adults in regard to ideological left–right self-placement? Evidence from 32 European countries".
- 7 Cabezas, M. (2022) "Silencing feminism? Gender and the rise of the nationalist far right in Spain". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2(47): 319-345. DOI: 10.1086/716858
- 8 Carbonell, J. (2026) "A room of one's own is all you can afford: Why young women move to the far right"; Carbonell, J. (2025) "From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti-feminist backlash".
- 9 Kuric Kardelis, S., A. Gómez Miguel and A. Sanmartín Ortí (2026) "Barómetro Juventud y Género 2025". *Centro Reina Sofía de Fad Juventud*. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18482115
- 10 For respondent gender, a binary coding for men and women is used. Respondents' socio-economic status is controlled for using their mother's education level – a standard, exogenous proxy linked to political behaviour. All cross-country models include fixed country effects, and time-series models also include survey-year dummies to capture unobserved trends. Following ESS guidance, analysis weights to correct for differences between the sample and the population are applied. The model for the 2024 analysis is $Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1(\text{Age}_i) + \beta_2(\text{Sex}_i) + \beta_3(\text{Age}_i * \text{Sex}_i) + \beta_4(\text{SES}_i) + \theta_i + \epsilon_i$. Where Y_i is the outcome of interest, it is explained by the interaction of a respondent's age and gender (β_3) under control for SES and country fixed effects (θ_i). Where the ESS time series is used, we also interact the survey year with age and gender to test if there are significant trends in gender/age gaps over time. In terms of estimation, ordinary least-squares regression (OLS) is used for all models, save for those that are binary (0/1), whereby calculations of the models are done through probit estimation.
- 11 Bristelle, A., J. Carbonell, S. Cohen et al. (2024) "How young people facing disadvantage view democracy in Europe". Policy study. Builders of Progress Series. Foundation for European Progressive Studies, January; Wirthwein, K. and J. Carbonell (2023) "Youth support for democracy in Spain: Democracy in the face of disadvantage". Policy study. Builders of Progress Series. Foundation for European Progressive Studies.
- 12 Carbonell, J. (2025) "From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti-feminist backlash".
- 13 Carbonell, J. (2026) "A room of one's own is all you can afford: Why young women move to the far right".
- 14 There is considerable debate about when one generation ends and another begins. For the purposes of this study, we use the terms Gen Z, young people and people under 30 interchangeably. We define young people as individuals aged between 18 and 29 at the time of writing, and we specify age when focusing on a more specific subgroup.
- 15 ESS data shows a similar pattern to CIS Data (Spanish Centre for Sociological Investigations). Andrino, B. and P. Ordaz (2025) "Los jóvenes son más de derechas que nunca. Estas son sus razones". *El País*, 2 November.
- 16 Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024) "A new global gender divide is emerging"; Mardling, A. (2025) "Explained: Gen Z's growing gender-based political divide". *Politics UK*, 1 September.
- 17 Kriesi, H., E. Grande, M. Dolezal et al. (2012) *Political Conflict in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- 18 Anduiza, E. and G. Rico (2024) "Sexism and the far-right vote: The individual dynamics of gender backlash". *American Journal of Political Science*, 2(68): 478-493. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12759
- 19 Burn-Murdoch, J. (2022) "Millennials are shattering the oldest rule in politics". *Financial Times*, 30 December.
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- 21 Cole, D. (2025) "The lurch to the right scares me': Could the left surprise in German election?" *The Guardian*, 18 February.
- 22 Abou-Chadi, T. (2024) "A gendered far-right wave among young voters in Western Europe?" *European Journal of Politics and Gender*. DOI: 10.1332/25151088Y2024D000000065
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Cordero, G., J. M. Ramírez-Dueñas and S. Sánchez (2024) "La brecha ideológica de género en la Generación Z en España". *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, March(67): 69-99. DOI: 10.21308/recp.67.03
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 This is crucial, as the focus groups will show that young men feel it is only some gender policies that discriminate against men, not women or society at large.
- 27 Kuric Kardelis, S., A. Gómez Miguel and A. Sanmartín Ortí (2026) "Barómetro Juventud y Género 2025".
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Carbonell, J. (2025) "From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti-feminist backlash"; Reeves, R. (2022) *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield).
- 30 Carbonell, J. (2025) "From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti-feminist backlash"
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 The focus groups covered many topics well beyond gender; however, given space constraints, this policy study focuses only on providing a stylised interpretation of the vast variety of ideas and opinions collected in the focus groups.
- 33 Budgeon, S. (2015) "Individualized femininity and feminist politics of choice". *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 3(22): 303-318. 10.1177/1350506815576602; Dabrowski, V. (2021) "Neoliberal feminism': Legitimising the gendered moral project of austerity". *The Sociological Review*, 1(69): 90-106. DOI: 10.1177/0038026120938289
- 34 Khanum, R. (2025) "The rise of the 'tradwife' movement on social media". Media Diversity Institute, 8 March; Leidig, E. (2023) *The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization* (New York: Columbia University Press). DOI: 10.7312/leid21016
- 35 Seron, C., S. Silbey, E. Cech et al. (2018) "I am not a feminist, but...': Hegemony of a meritocratic ideology and the limits of critique among women in engineering. *Work and Occupations*, 2(45): 131-167. DOI: 10.1177/0730888418759774
- 36 The word "incompetent" was also mentioned.
- 37 In fact, "polarisation" and "radicalisation" were concepts widely associated with politicians. While some participants blamed only politicians, others also blamed citizens or social media for encouraging or contributing to polarisation. One participant said "polarisation also comes from society as a whole, from the move towards extremes, both on the left and on the right" (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group), while another said "you just have to leave a comment on a photo on Instagram and you'll get loads of criticism" (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group). However, all agreed that politicians bore major responsibility for the issue.
- 38 One participant put his hopes on a general economic crash to solve the housing issue: "Unless something really terrible happens that affects a lot of us in a bad way, I don't see prices going down, or the upward trend in housing and all that reversing" (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).
- 39 Another participant said "With housing I'm quite negative, although in my personal case I do see myself having a house in the distant future. But that's because I have a specific situation: I've lived with my parents and been able to save, and I have a partner with whom I could buy. Not everyone has that situation" (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group).
- 40 One participant defended this: "I think we have more opportunities than our parents did" because "in the past, it was not so easy to study" (Patricia, female, 29, PP, nurse, mixed group).
- 41 One participant stated that "I do think there are fewer opportunities now than years ago, like in Spain in the early 2000s or 2005. I really believe my parents had it easier than we do" (Diego, male, 29, Vox, consultant, male-only group).
- 42 Carbonell, J. (2026) "A room of one's own is all you can afford: Why young women move to the far right"; Wirthwein, K. and J. Carbonell (2023) "Youth support for democracy in Spain: Democracy in the face of disadvantage".
- 43 This resonates with quantitative research showing that, in recent years in Spain, there is a disconnect between personal and societal assessments: people's negative evaluation of society contrasts sharply with their positive self-evaluations. See Miyar, M. and D. Romero Jordán (2025) "Household perceptions of the Spanish economy: Growth trends and social frictions". *Funcas SEFO*, 4(14).

44 Other female participants agreed as well: “I think the same as her” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group) and “me too” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group). This was also agreed by male participants: “I think today it’s pretty much equal, it depends on your qualifications. It’s true that in certain sectors, especially at the top levels of leadership, there are mostly men. But I see that as a residual effect from the past” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

45 The full quote is: “I do not think we have achieved gender equality yet, but it is getting closer and closer. For example, at home, my father and mother both do the same things, they cook and do things and so on, but then when there is a family dinner or my whole family gets together at my grandmother’s house, it is always the women who cook, then they clean up etc. It is usually the older women, who are used to always having done it, but then I think that in general, with younger people, equality is more or less being achieved in those kinds of things around the house, for example” (Carlos, male, 24, Podemos, engineer, mixed group).

46 “I’ll give a personal example. My father works at a big multinational company. Sometimes he helps hire people, not for his own department, but others. And his boss tells him not to hire women between 20 and 30 years old, no matter their qualifications. That’s because his boss is an old-fashioned man who started working there 60 years ago, refuses to retire and still calls the shots. So the company ends up having a sexist tint, not because of policy, but because the guy in charge is sexist” (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

47 “Parental leave is already the same for men and women now” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

48 “We also have to recognise that this change only really started with our generation or just before. So, we need to give it time, let women rise to the top and then see what happens. If in 500 years we still have 90% male engineers and 90% female nurses, then maybe we’ll need to ask why. But it’s been less than a hundred years since gender segregation was normal; my mother went to an all-girls school. So, it’s way too soon to expect complete equality in professions. It’s just residual; we’ve only just come out of that system” (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

49 “It’s true that in certain sectors, especially at the top levels of leadership, there are mostly men. But I see that as a residual effect from the past. If a man started working at 20 and is now 60 and in an executive position, that’s normal; 45 years ago, there simply weren’t as many women working, so obviously, there are fewer female directors aged 60 today. But I see that as a leftover from earlier times. Nowadays, I think it’s completely balanced, and the fact that there are still more male leaders seems to me just a residual consequence, not inequality” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group) and “among younger generations, I think it’s completely equal” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group). Another participant said: “I think things have changed a lot, and feminism has done a good job. There’s still some way to go, because I do think there’s still some gender discrimination, for example, around pregnancy” (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

50 “With gender equality, I wrote ‘progress’ because we talked about how in the past there was not so much equality and so on. I see that progress has been made” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).

51 Another female participant recalled: “Because, for example, when I come back from a party, I have to warn someone, get a taxi carefully, send my location to my mother... because there have been kidnappings in VTCs. If I take a night bus, I’m paying attention to who gets on, if a guy seems weird. I don’t feel the same as a man walking down the street” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group).

52 She had even prompted her boss to organise gender-sensitivity training for her colleagues. Nevertheless, she did not feel that the training would change much: “In my job, even though they’ve [sic] given talks, they’ve only changed their behaviour at work. Outside work they’ll stay the same. And it also creates resentment because you are forbidding something... people who have been making sexist comments for 30 years. They’re not going to change because of one talk” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).

53 Tyner, K. (2025) “The succession effect: Change over time in women’s political leadership styles in New Zealand”. *Comparative Political Studies*, 10(58): 2202-2236. DOI: 10.1177/00104140241290207

54 Arruzza, C., T. Bhattacharya and N. Fraser (2018) *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso Books).

55 Rottenberg, C. (2018) *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

56 Murnen, S. K., C. Wright and G. Kaluzny (2002) “If ‘boys will be boys,’ then girls will be victims? A meta-analytic review of the research that relates masculine ideology to sexual aggression”. *Sex Roles*, 11(46): 359-375. DOI: 10.1023/A:1020488928736

57 Another argued that “it’s not the fault of the system but of the existence of some retrograde people that you will find everywhere” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).

58 The full quote is: “I feel that gender equality will never be exactly equal because we are not exactly equal, but I feel that gender equality is about women having the same dignity as men – and I think that is the case. I feel that I have it, I do not feel that anyone treats me in a demeaning or worse way because I am a woman. Not at any time. I do not know why, but maybe there is a tendency

for some things to be more for women or more for men... For example, in my degree program, we are almost all girls, and in other degree programs that my friends are in, they are almost all boys. In the end, that also defines jobs and positions in society, but nothing prevents me from doing what they do or them from doing what I do. Sometimes there are differences because they exist, but not at a legal level or at a level where one person cannot do something else. Not as an imposition, but as an observable trend. As long as everyone is comfortable with what they do, it's not a problem" (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group).

59 If that level of gender equality will persist long term is a different question, but evidence shows that many gender inequalities increase with age.

60 Reeves, R. (2022) *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*.

61 Carbonell, J. (2025) "From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti-feminist backlash".

62 Ibid.

63 Blau, F. D. and L. M. Kahn (2017) "The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, and explanations". *Journal of Economic Literature*, 3(55): 789-865. DOI: 10.1257/jel.20160995

64 "Gender Equality Index 2024: Tackling violence against women, tackling gender inequalities". European Institute for Gender Equality. Publications Office of the European Union, 2025.

65 This participant also pointed out that in her case, it had been "her dad who quit his job to take care of me, not my mum" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). 66

66 "I put 'equality between men and women'" (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group).

67 "Feminism is social action, the movement, and gender equality is the goal" (Óscar, male, 22, PSOE, student, male-only group). "I wrote 'business' and 'politics.' For gender equality, 'equal opportunities' and 'generational gaps'" (Diego, male, 29, Vox, consultant, male-only group). "Feminism has become attached to certain political parties and movements, and that's created a divide between 'feminism' and 'gender equality.' [...] I'm not against the word, I'm against how it's been used and who's claimed it" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

68 "I wrote 'mistake' because many people think it means that women are above men, when in reality it means equality. I am a linguist, and, etymologically, it does not mean that anyone is above anyone else. It is the same as when they say 'feminazis'. These are conflicting concepts" (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).

69 "For feminism, I wrote 'false equality'; I don't think it represents what it should. For gender equality, I wrote that it's the proper term that really represents equality between both sexes. Feminism, for me, only represents one side. It's also been politicised. The feminist movement today doesn't represent what gender equality actually means, even if the dictionary says it does" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

70 One participant argued that feminism was being used "to confront people rather than to seek equality" and that it was a "political problem, it's not real gender equality" (Hugo, male, 29, Vox, engineer, mixed group).

71 Another female participant also called it "extremism" (Patricia, female, 29, PP, nurse, mixed group) and associated it with left-wing parties.

72 "There is a lot of hypocrisy. Many women who show off being feminists are the same ones who bullied me for being fat. Many said awful things to me, like that I had to vomit in order to be able to flirt. And then they're the first to pose on Instagram wearing purple, saying 'long live feminism'. And then diminish women" (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).

73 Another said: "Yes. There are extreme feminists – or rather, female supremacists (Hembrism) – who generate hatred toward men to feel superior, and men who generate hatred toward feminists to try to make them inferior. But when you explain to a normal person that you just want equality because a different organ doesn't change anything, most people say it makes sense" (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group).

74 "[Extreme feminism] is a minority in numbers, but it is more visible" (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group).

75 Llach, L. (2023) "Spain's powerful feminist movement split over trans and rape laws". *Euronews*, 3 September.

76 "If it represented what it's supposed to, yes. But as it is now, no" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group). "I'd say yes in theory, if it really meant equality, not politics" (Diego, male, 29, Vox, consultant, male-only group).

77 This issue was also present in discussions on the dominant form of feminism, which more right-wing men equated to Irene Montero's version and more left-wing men did not.

78 Off, G. (2023) "Gender equality salience, backlash and radical right voting in the gender-equal context of Sweden". *West European Politics*, 3(46): 451-476. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2022.2084986; Alexander, A., N. Charron and G. Off (2025) "Young men, gendered labour market competition, and opposition to gender equality policy across 27 EU countries". *West European Politics*. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2025.2524908

79 "I think we are reaching an optimal point of equality, so I would bet more on that, on continuing to raise awareness or taking measures to further improve the responses to these types of negative situations that occur (rape, abortion, things like that). I prefer that to doing things that cause a lot of noise and confrontation, such as imposing a certain percentage of women in companies. I believe that things like that would be too drastic and could backfire" (Sergio, male, 29, PSOE, receptionist, mixed group).

80 The full quote is "The only thing that could bother me is quotas. I've heard that some big companies are trying to 'balance' things by favouring women, and I think, okay, fine, but if I apply for a job and deserve it based on merits and then lose it just because I'm a man, I would not think that makes sense and that would annoy me. I'm not obsessed with it, but it doesn't seem fair either. Apart from that, I see everything else as equal" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

81 "Say I'm having problems with my girlfriend, we argue, she wakes up with a swollen face because of a bad tooth, and she calls the police saying I hit her. I'd be in the police station for two days. If the roles were reversed and she hit me, people would probably laugh about it. I think women have an advantage there" (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group).

82 "Honestly, I think that's an irrational fear [of being falsely accused]. I don't know anyone who's actually experienced that. The cases we see on TV or social media are so rare that I'm more likely to get hit by a car than falsely accused of assault. I think gender violence laws are necessary. They're not perfect, but false accusations aren't a real problem statistically" (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

83 "I think that for every case like that, there are also cases where those laws have saved lives. If someone is violent towards a woman and ends up in custody, maybe that prevents a murder a few days later. So it's not black and white" (Daniel, male, 24, Sumar, student, male-only group). "I know people who've experienced false accusations too, but I also think those situations are a side effect of a system that, overall, protects a lot of people and saves lives" (Óscar, male, 22, PSOE, student, male-only group). "It'd be great if the law worked perfectly and there were no false accusations, but I think overall it's still worth it. I wouldn't change it. It protects women from violence and potentially saves lives, and I think that outweighs the negatives" (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

84 "It's not exactly an 'advantage', but it's true that when a woman makes a complaint, she's believed almost automatically. And if it's false, the man is left with a permanent stain on his record. Even if it's proven false later, that accusation follows you forever, at work, with friends, with family. It's a heavy thing. Obviously, there are many real cases too, and sometimes those laws save lives, but false accusations can be devastating" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

85 "It is true that [women] are more selective, but within reason, we should not go to extremes. But I do not see it as a negative thing" (Hugo, male, 29, Vox, engineer, mixed group).

86 "I have a friend who jokes that there's 'inflation in dating'. He says, 'A few years ago, you could "get" a woman who was a seven, but now even a five is hard work, dating inflation!' It's funny, but I do think social media has made people more selective. Because women get more attention online, and that gives them more options. It's not something bad, but it changes dynamics, there's more exposure, more comparison" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

87 "From my baldness, I already have problems" (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group). "There are women who openly say they don't like bald men, for instance. Saying that openly is kind of unfair, but it happens" (Daniel, male, 24, Sumar, student, male-only group).

88 "Attraction is about taste, it doesn't disadvantage anyone" (Diego, male, 29, Vox, consultant, male-only group). "I do think there's a small minority who look for specific things. My ex, for example, her dad was a wealthy businessman, remarried to a woman of 25 when he was 54. So that kind of thing exists, but it's not 'most women'" (Óscar, male, 22, PSOE, student, male-only group).

89 "I think a small minority might have very specific preferences, same as men do. People are attracted to different things, physically or otherwise [...] it goes both ways" (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group). "I think that happens across the board, not just with women. Gay men and lesbians experience the same kind of 'inflation'. I mean, even footballers date pop stars, that's just how it is" (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

90 "I have heard a lot of resentful guys say, 'All women are sluts' because things have gone badly for them, their girlfriend has left them or they are angry at the world, and they say that. I believe the problem lies with that man and it is not that women are more demanding" (Sergio, male, 29, PSOE, receptionist, mixed group).

91 “[My girlfriend] is a two out of ten” (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group). “I have female friends who [are] ugly, really ugly, and famous guys still message them on Instagram. Verified accounts, reality TV contestants, it happens and it makes it difficult for the rest” (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group).

92 One participant said: “For example, in my company, the cleaning person has always been a woman. We have had several changes, and a man came in, and at first, my bosses did not really like him. Well, he was fired in the end, but the fact that he was a man had nothing to do with it. He worked that day, and the bosses did not like him, but it could have been a woman. However, we were shocked at first, when we did not know how he worked” (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group) and another: “I have a classmate who did a higher degree in early childhood education to work in nurseries, did his internship and realised he had to do something else because when he was doing his internship, the grandmothers and mothers would say, ‘what is this guy doing here surrounded by babies?’ They did not trust him. He realised he would not be hired there because it is a job where men are sometimes looked at strangely. [...] It would be a disadvantage in that sector, but not in another sector” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group).

93 One participant recounted that women also rejected common complaints from men.

94 “Maybe women are interested in dating men who are... I do not know, normal [...] Poor murderers, we do not want to date them” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group). “I just think that now we demand what we deserve: a normal person. I think that in the past, women put up with whatever they got, even abusers, but not now” (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group). “It is true that women are more selective now, but that does not put men at a disadvantage. They are just selective about reasonable things” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group).

95 Another participant said: “it really annoys me when people say ‘men die too’, ‘women also kill’. How many? It’s not comparable. Rapes, assaults... it’s not comparable. All of us have felt fear at some point or experienced something” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). “If you say ‘men kill’ or ‘men rape’, well, it’s almost always men. But if you’re a man and you don’t do that, you shouldn’t feel alluded to” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group).

96 Another participant said: “it benefits them because their partners can work, because there’s more independence, more personal freedom” (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group).

97 “I have friends who perhaps used to talk about more ‘primitive’ things, so to speak, and now they allow themselves to have feelings, cry with each other, talk about things that worry them, say ‘I am going to the psychologist’, etc. It is like, ‘Wow, you are normal’. That is what I mean by ‘normal’. It is not that there are more, but rather that many had to hide before so as not to look bad in front of their friends” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).

98 Another participant said: “the younger generations... They are undoing everything we have achieved” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).

99 Off, G. (2023) “Gender equality salience, backlash and radical right voting in the gender-equal context of Sweden”; Alexander, A., N. Charron and G. Off (2025) “Young men, gendered labour market competition, and opposition to gender equality policy across 27 EU countries”.

100 One female participant did support the idea that men who exposed sexism were “people who are completely insecure and with low self-confidence, afraid that a woman with good skills takes their job away because they are not qualified” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group).

101 Better education in schools was also mentioned but briefly. On this issue, participants said: “At my school they gave us feminist talks every year, and that was the worst day for the boys. It generated rejection” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group). “Education shouldn’t be a one-off subject but something transversal. Like when they taught me about the women writers of the Generation of ‘27. Before, they weren’t included. Now they are. Things like that help” (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group). “I’d also focus on education, teaching equality from the start, so that the next generations grow up with all of this much clearer and better understood than we did. That way, we can hopefully reach full equality in the near future” (Adrián, male, 24, PSOE, PhD candidate, male-only group).

102 “I think quotas are wrong. I don’t think they’re necessary, a qualified woman who deserves the job should be selected just like a man. I see it as totally equal” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

103 The same participant also said that “They’re doing women a disservice by creating forced quotas, because instead of empowering them, they’re implying they’re weaker or less capable. True equality means equal conditions, not artificial quotas” and “I don’t see quotas in dangerous jobs like construction or mining. Those quotas only seem to appear in offices or corporate jobs, the ‘nice’ side of equality, so to speak” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group).

104 “I think some quotas are about balancing physical capacity, because obviously men and women are different in that regard. For example, in the police or Civil Guard exams, everything is the same except the physical tests. That’s the only part that changes. I think it makes sense, otherwise women wouldn’t be able to compete equally” (Óscar, male, 22, PSOE, student, male-only group).

- 105 “Like leadership, in the end it is about merit” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group).
- 106 “I agree with her, but I chose ‘strongly disagree’ [to the question on whether more females are needed in leadership positions]; everyone manages things according to what they know and so on, but it does not matter if they are a man or a woman” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group).
- 107 “But the fact that once [sex offenders] go to prison, they can sometimes get out so soon... It is scary” (Claudia, female, 29, Sumar, linguist, mixed group). “A restraining order should be issued, that... I do not know how it would be done, but women cannot be murdered by someone they have already reported. I mean, how safe are they? Why would they report it, then? They often think that the aggressor will find out that they have reported him and will come after them, and that will make things worse. I think that is the reason why many people do not report it. And it is clear that there are no consequences. If he has murdered her, what good did it do to report him? That discourages people from reporting” (Silvia, female, 29, PP, secretary, mixed group).
- 108 “My best friend was raped by her best friend’s father. She has been waiting three years for the trial. This year it finally took place... and he won. Even though she was the victim. So, don’t come to me with the story that ‘if you get accused of rape your life is ruined’, because Dani Alves raped a girl in the bathroom of a nightclub and just because he’s a football player and has money... where is he now? Out on the street. And he’s still playing football, being famous, with money. Same with the PSG player who abuses his wife and still plays. So no, men are not unprotected. There are tons and tons of cases” (Elena, female, 20, no party, aircraft mechanic, female-only group).
- 109 “There are women who go to report gender violence, and they’re questioned so much that they don’t even report in the end. They’re obstructed from minute one” (Nuria, female, 27, PSOE, HR specialist, female-only group).
- 110 “I’d repeal the current law that’s letting rapists out every day. We should go back to the previous minimum sentences or find another solution, but definitely repeal this one, it’s wrong” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group). “I’d start by reforming the law they passed, fix the mistakes” (Daniel, male, 24, Sumar, student, male-only group).
- 111 “I know a case, not me, but I was there. We were in a nightclub, and a girl felt uncomfortable because it was crowded. She told the bouncer that my friend touched her, which wasn’t true. The police came; they almost arrested him. In the end, she admitted she’d lied because she just felt overwhelmed. So yes, it does happen. And the problem is that false claims like that make people doubt real victims, and that really hurts women” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group). “I know people who’ve experienced false accusations too” (Óscar, male, 22, PSOE, student, male-only group).
- 112 “For the question ‘do current measures disadvantage men’ I marked ‘disagree’. Because it is true – this was explained to me by someone who suffered abuse – that if a woman reports, the man spends the night in the holding cell automatically. But if a man reports a woman, she is not put in a cell. I think that if someone has committed a crime, man or woman, it should be the same. Women can also kill. [...] But I’m not ‘totally’ in disagreement, because the current situation shows that the real risk is suffered by women” (Lucía, female, 20, PP, student, female-only group).
- 113 “[Sex offenders] are very manipulative. On top of that, they are the ones who get out first. They serve very short sentences. What I would do is increase those sentences significantly and do something to remove them from society because they are sick, they are not going to change” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group). “I do not think [sex offenders can change], and if they do something serious, they do not deserve the chance to change either. I mean, if you have raped five girls, you have been caught, and now you want to change, well... You should not have done it in the first place. You are disturbed” (Irene, female, 19, PP, student, mixed group).
- 114 “I’d start by reforming the law they passed, fix the mistakes, toughen the penalties and also invest in proper police monitoring of people who’ve already been reported. You often see on the news cases where a woman had reported her attacker once or twice, but the police stopped following up after a few months, and then something tragic happens” (Daniel, male, 24, Sumar, student, male-only group).
- 115 “I think penalties for false accusations should be tougher. That’s how you reduce any crime, you increase the consequences. If a woman lies and nothing happens to her, that encourages others to do it. But if the punishment matched the damage done, moral, social and personal, then I think it would stop a lot of that abuse of the system” (Rubén, male, 25, Vox, commercial agent, male-only group). “I think penalties should be harsher across the board, for both rapists and for people who lie, men or women” (Iván, male, 29, PP, aircraft mechanic, male-only group).
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While much focus has been devoted to the tradwives movement and the explicit anti-feminism of the far-right, this policy study argues that a great deal of the decline in feminist mobilisation and identification among the young people in Spain is due to the rise of individualist or neoliberal forms of feminism, which have received much less attention.

It is the strength of this form of neoliberal or “girlboss” feminism that can explain why Spain, despite emerging as a European leader in advancing gender-equality policies, suffers a growing conservative youth. In Spain, while young women remain more supportive of the left than men, both genders are moving ideologically to the right. At the same time, while gender equality values are strong among both young men and young women, identification with feminism is weakening among both genders.

Emphasising personal success over collective action, this perspective resonates strongly with a generation shaped by economic insecurity, political distrust and social atomisation. For many young people, feminism is increasingly perceived as part of a distant and ineffective establishment rather than a transformative force.

The study highlights the risks this shift poses for the future of gender equality and democratic politics. It argues that addressing antifeminist sentiment requires not only defending feminist principles, but also reconnecting them with the material realities and aspirations of young people.

Combining rigorous analysis with clear policy recommendations, this report offers essential insights for policymakers, activists and researchers seeking to understand – and respond to – one of the most pressing social dynamics of our time.

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