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EQUALIZE

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL OPINION AND VOTING AMONG GENERATION Z

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy study asks a timely question, is a new political gender divide emerging within Generation Z in Europe, and if so, what does it mean for progressive politics? Public debate increasingly portrays young women as moving in a more progressive direction, while young men are said to be turning more conservative or even towards the far right. The findings of this study suggest a more nuanced reality. Gender differences among young people do exist, but they vary across countries and across issues. They do not amount to a simple cultural confrontation between young women and men. Rather, they reflect shared structural pressures that are understood and lived differently.

The study combines quantitative and qualitative research. It draws on the latest European Social Survey data for the EU 27, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the UK, and complements this with 17 focus groups involving more than 100 young people in Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden. This mixed-methods design enables not only mapping broad European patterns but also understanding how young people themselves describe their everyday realities, frustrations and political outlook.

The quantitative findings show that youth gender gaps are clearest in two areas: ideological self-placement and attitudes towards gender equality. Across Europe, the ideological gap is strongest among those aged 15-29. Young women are more likely than older women to identify as left wing, while young men are generally not dramatically more right wing than older men, except in some national contexts. This suggests that the widening gap is driven primarily by the progressive shift among young women, rather than by a broad rightward turn among young men.

A similar pattern emerges in attitudes towards gender equality. Young women are more likely than young men to express progressive views on equal pay, workplace discrimination and sexual harassment. Yet the underlying dynamics differ across countries. In some cases, the divide reflects stronger egalitarian views among young women; in others, it reflects comparatively more conservative positions among young men. Sweden shows the clearest and most consistent youth gender divide, while Germany shows much less evidence of one. Greece, Poland and Spain present more mixed patterns. By contrast, voting behaviour is less sharply divided. Differences in support for party families exist, but they are weaker and less consistent than media narratives often imply, according to the data we analysed.

The focus groups add depth and texture to these findings. Across all five countries, young people describe a generation coming of age amid overlapping crises: rising living costs; housing insecurity; labour market uncertainty; climate anxiety; geopolitical instability; and frustration with political institutions. Many are pessimistic about the future of their societies, yet more optimistic about their own ability to adapt. This produces a striking combination of resilience and disillusionment: a strong emphasis on self-reliance, paired with growing doubt that political systems can still deliver stability, fairness and opportunity.

Within this broader context, gender differences appear less as outright opposition and more as different ways of interpreting insecurity. Young women tend to understand instability through questions of safety, discrimination, unequal care responsibilities and reproductive autonomy. Young men more often frame insecurity in terms of opportunity, recognition, fairness and the erosion of predictable routes to success through education and work. Many support gender equality in principle, but see broader economic pressures as more urgent. In this context, some equality measures

can be perceived as redistributing already scarce opportunities, feeding a zero-sum mindset.

The study also shows that polarisation around feminism is often overstated. Across countries, there is broad support for equality as a democratic principle and widespread recognition that inequalities persist. The divide lies less in core values and more in framing, language and emotional salience. Many young women openly identify with feminism, while many young men support its aims but feel uneasy with the label. Social media shapes these perceptions indirectly, but the findings do not suggest that openly anti-feminist narratives dominate young men's views overall.

For progressive politics, the central conclusion is clear: the emerging gender divide within Generation Z should be understood less as a deep ideological split and more as a reflection of insecurity, precarity and weak institutional trust.

Policy recommendations

1. **Rebuild material security for young people.**

   Strengthen early-career prospects; enforce equal pay; improve wage transparency; and expand family-friendly workplace policies such as paid parental leave, affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements.

2. **Strengthen social protection in the transition to adulthood.**

   Expand affordable housing, targeted youth employment support, income protection and access to reproductive healthcare to reduce precarity and improve life planning.

3. **Invest in mental health support.**

   Scale up accessible services for young adults, reduce stigma around help-seeking among men, and respond to the high levels of anxiety and insecurity reported by young women.

4. **Promote inclusive gender norms.**

   Support education and awareness initiatives that encourage emotional literacy, shared caregiving, and more diverse models of masculinity and femininity, while challenging stereotypes in leadership, work and family life.

5. **Reduce polarisation through effective governance.**

   Young people want politics that delivers. Progressive actors should prioritise visible problem-solving and credible results, especially on housing, jobs, inequality and social protection.

6. **Link structural reform to lived experience.**

   Policy communication should show how collective reforms improve everyday life by increasing freedom, dignity, security and future opportunity. This is essential for building broad support across gender lines.

Overall, the study finds that support for gender equality remains broad among young Europeans. This gives progressive politics real space to advance equality, provided it is embedded in a wider agenda of economic security, democratic credibility and fair life chances for all.

INTRODUCTION

"A new global gender divide is emerging",

Financial Times, 26 January 2025[1]

"Are young women more left-wing than men – and, if so, why?"

BBC, 23 August 2025[2]

"Why are men so much more right-wing than women now?"

Vox (online news platform), 27 May 2025[3]

"Gen Z men, women have a deep political divide.
It's made dating a nightmare",

USA Today, 18 July 2025[4]

Authors: Elena Avramovska, Matteo Dressler

What these headlines have in common is their focus on a phenomenon that has attracted growing attention in recent years: a possible gender divide in progressive and conservative values within Generation Z (Gen Z) in Western democracies.[5] Across a number of countries, young women and young men appear to be diverging in their political values and attitudes. At the same time, a broader debate has emerged around the claim that young men are becoming more likely to support far-right parties.

Yet emerging research on these developments paints a more complex picture than media coverage often suggests. The evidence is mixed, and the existence, size and direction of youth gender gaps vary significantly, depending on the country and the issue under examination. Studies of vote choice and left-right ideology do not consistently point to a clear youth gender divide. By contrast, studies of attitudes towards gender equality and feminism show more robust and recurring differences between young men and young women. Even here, however, interpretations diverge. Some analyses attribute the divide primarily to young women becoming more progressive, while others point to young men adopting more conservative positions. Socioeconomic factors such as education, income, unemployment and labour market competition also appear to shape these dynamics.[6]

A number of hypotheses have been put forward to explain these shifts in values and voting behaviour. Research from countries such as the USA and the UK, as well as South Korea, highlights the #MeToo movement and other feminist movements, such as the South Korean 4B movement, as significant catalysts. Particularly among younger cohorts, the movements intensified the politicisation of gender issues and brought gender-equality debates to much wider audiences. It is argued that this moment accelerated broader trends of emancipation and

liberalisation, with young women increasingly embracing progressive views on questions such as gender equality and economic redistribution, including support for welfare policies.[7]

At the same time, over the past 15 years, several Western democracies have witnessed a reversal of long-standing patterns in which young men had typically attained higher educational outcomes and experienced more favourable positions in the labour market, compared to young women. Young women are now increasingly achieving higher levels of educational attainment than young men and, in some countries, surpassing them by a considerable margin. In many of these same contexts, the gender pay gap has narrowed, especially among younger age groups. Together, these developments have contributed to a changing landscape in which young women and men compete more directly in the labour market. As a result, labour market competition between young men and women may feel more immediate than in previous decades, with young women often entering the workforce with stronger educational credentials. Some scholars argue that this has contributed to resentment among some young men, expressed in new forms of sexism.[8]

Taken together, however, the existing literature still leaves important questions unanswered. In particular, we know relatively little about why young men and women appear to be diverging in some countries but not in others, and why these differences emerge across certain political attitudes and behaviours but not others. This study starts from that mixed empirical picture and seeks to bring greater clarity to the debate.

More specifically, the study

- empirically explores whether a gender divide between young men and young women in European societies exists in relation to values and voting behaviour, and identifies the regional differences in the form that such a divide takes;

- examines the factors and mechanisms that may help explain the presence of such a divide and which factors appear to matter less; and

- assesses the implications of these findings for progressive politics, in particular for the design of youth- and gender-sensitive policies and political communication strategies.

This study focuses specifically on the European Union (EU) member state context, allowing us to examine these questions within a broadly shared political and institutional framework. This framework includes common policy developments, such as the Work-Life Balance Directive and the Pay Transparency Directive, both of which have required substantial implementation and policy adaptation across the EU and its member states, making EU member states particularly useful cases for analysis, while also acknowledging and leveraging the significant differences that persist across countries. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. It draws on data from all 27 EU member states, as well as Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the UK, using the latest wave of the European Social Survey (ESS). To provide more detailed insights, the analysis also focuses on five countries selected to reflect Europe's geographical and cultural diversity, particularly regarding historical gender-norm contexts (Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden).

The quantitative analysis is complemented by qualitative evidence from 17 focus groups conducted with young men and women across these five countries, involving more than 100 participants. Together, these approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that may explain why gender divides emerge in some dimensions and contexts but not in others.

The study is structured into four parts.

Chapter 1 maps the emerging research field and synthesises existing knowledge, highlighting both what we know and what we still do not know about whether young men and young women are drifting apart in their political views and voting behaviour. It also discusses the main theoretical explanations proposed for recently emerging youth gender gaps.

Chapter 2 presents quantitative survey evidence on left-right ideology, attitudes towards gender equality, and voting patterns among men and women across different age groups in Europe, with particular attention paid to Gen Z in the five case-study countries. Overall, quantitative findings suggest that gender gaps among young women and men are most consistent in ideological self-placement and attitudes towards gender equality but less so in support for different party families. The youth gender gap in left-right ideology appears to be driven mainly by young women identifying more strongly with the left, rather than by young men becoming markedly more right wing compared to previous generations. By contrast, in attitudes towards gender equality, young men are more often found to hold more conservative views than older men today, while young women frequently do not differ as clearly from older women.

Chapter 3 turns to the focus group research. Here, the findings point to a generation shaped by crisis, scepticism towards institutions and liberal individualism, while also showing a strong normative commitment to gender equality – albeit with varying degrees of intensity. Gender differences emerge less in outright opposition to equality and more in the salience attached to the issue by young women and men; the emotional intensity with which it is discussed; and differing understandings of gendered leadership, fairness and responsibility. Rather than revealing a sharply polarised divide between female supporters and male opponents of equality, the dominant pattern is one of broad, though at times diffuse, support for gender equality, accompanied by contestation over its meaning, its framing, and the extent of structural change that has been achieved and remains necessary. This ambivalence represents both a risk and an opportunity. On one hand, crisis-induced insecurity can heighten the appeal of hierarchical or traditional models that promise stability and a sense of protection. On the other, ongoing contestation over the meaning and interpretation of gender equality itself constitutes an additional risk, potentially fragmenting support and enabling competing narratives to take hold. At the same time, a broad normative commitment to gender equality remains widely shared across countries and political backgrounds, creating space for policy interventions to further advance equality.

Chapter 4 concludes and synthesises the study's findings, while also outlining key policy proposals for progressive politics. Building on empirical insights from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, it argues that the gender divide within Gen Z is best understood as a reflection of broader socio-economic pressures, such as a lack of affordable housing and welfare support, rather than a deepening ideological rift. The focus therefore shifts from describing attitudes to identifying actionable responses. In particular, this chapter highlights the need to address the economic realities and broader political trends shaping young people's lives, including economic insecurity, constrained social mobility and limited institutional trust, while ensuring that policy responses resonate with how these challenges are experienced and interpreted. It sets out a framework for linking structural reform with everyday concerns, such as independence, stability and opportunity, and proposes a set of policy directions aimed at strengthening economic security, social protection, mental wellbeing, inclusive social norms and effective governance in ways that can build broad and durable support for democratic systems.

1. THE GEN Z GENDER DIVIDE IN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Authors: Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron, Gefjon Off

Are young men and women drifting apart in their political views and voting patterns? This chapter starts by explaining the more long-term changes in women's and men's political behaviour. It then proceeds to review the recently emerging research strand on whether today's young generation of men and women are increasingly drifting apart in their political views and voting patterns. It ends with a discussion of possible theoretical explanations for recently emerging youth gender gaps.

1.1 Gender gaps in political behaviour: From the traditional to the modern gender gap

Western democracies have generally seen a shift in the ideological gender gap during the second half of the past century.[9] In the 1950s and 1960s, women held a more right-wing ideology than men and were more likely to vote for centre-right parties; this has been described as the "traditional gender gap". During the 1970s and 1980s, women shifted towards the left, and by the 1990s, women held more left-wing ideology and became more likely to vote for social democratic parties than men in many Western democracies.

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This shift is usually explained by liberalising trends in society, with society becoming more secular and women becoming more highly educated, more likely to participate in the labour force and more likely to divorce, amongst others.[10] Prior to liberalising trends, in more religious societies, women were more religious than men, on average. Furthermore, as mostly married housewives, they relied less on public services, such as childcare and elderly care, than they did after entering the labour force. Yet, as women became more highly educated and entered the labour force in liberalising societies, they increasingly began to value their individual rights, opportunities and self-expression, which are values linked to progressive ideology. Furthermore, as they entered the labour force, they increasingly relied on the public sector for at least two reasons: (1) the public sector provides services that alleviate the double burden of unpaid care work and paid labour; and (2) women are disproportionately more likely to work in the public sector – for instance, in the education or health sectors – that is, their

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jobs are more likely rely on a strong public sector. Given that social democratic parties traditionally favoured a strong public sector, they increasingly attracted women's votes. Finally, liberalising divorce legislation resulted in women's greater autonomy, but also greater financial insecurity and a greater double burden of care work and paid labour as divorced women. This, in turn, increased their reliance on the welfare state. These are some of the trends that led to the so-called "gender realignment", with women shifting from the political centre-right to the political centre-left relative to men. Over the second half of the 20th century, these gendered shifts in political behaviour were driven, in particular, by young generations of women.[11]

There are some caveats to this general theory of "gender realignment". Firstly, this trend is not universal: beyond Western European democracies, many countries did not experience such shifts in ideological gender gaps.[12] Secondly, in countries that experienced such shifts in the ideological gender gap, this trend has stagnated since the 1990s: during the 2000s and 2010s, women did not become increasingly left wing.[13] Thirdly, new evidence suggests that the theorised mechanisms explaining the gender realignment do not seem to explain individual women's shifting ideology. Following the life trajectories and political ideology of the same women over time, research shows that women who enter employment, attain university education, or divorce or separate from their partners *do not* shift towards more left-wing ideology.[14] Rather, more left-wing women are also the ones who are more likely self-select into such life trajectories, which raises the question of why women become more left wing to begin with. More in-depth research may thus be needed to explain why we see different trends across different countries, why these trends seem to have stagnated in the 2000s and 2010s, and what the mechanisms are that drive women's political realignment.

Overall, many Western European countries have seen a realignment from women voting more traditionally and right wing than men in the 1950s and 1960s to women voting more for social democratic parties and identifying more strongly as left wing than men in the 1990s. This trend goes hand in hand with increasing women's emancipation and liberalising societies. So far, research does not sufficiently explain cross-country differences and the precise mechanisms explaining this realignment.

Recently, media reports and election results suggest that a new gender divide in political ideology may be emerging among today's young generation.[15] Is Gen Z more politically divided than previous generations, and do we therefore see a new widening of the gender gap in ideology and vote choice in the 2020s? If so, how does this trend manifest across different countries, and why may this be happening?

1.1.1 The recent Gen Z gender divide

Recent reports suggest a growing "Gen Z gender divide" in political behaviour, in voting behaviour, political left-right ideology and political attitudes towards gender equality or feminism. Essentially, this work asks are young men and women today more different in their vote choice or political attitudes than older men and women today, or older men and women when they were young? Some of these reports and research articles suggest that young men and women nowadays are drifting apart in their political views and behaviour – and more so than young men and women of previous generations or older men and women today. Other studies find such patterns in only a few countries or for specific political attitudes, but do not find more general cross-country trends, or trends that would show across several types of political attitudes or behaviour. To date, there is still disagreement in this quickly emerging line of research on whether and to what extent young men and women are drifting substantially apart in their political behaviour and attitudes, and, if so, why this may be happening.

In this section, we review existing work on whether and to what extent young men and women today are more strongly diverging in their political behaviour and attitudes, compared to older men and women today and previous generations of young men and women.

> "The overall evidence may be summarised as follows: young men and women are drifting apart in some political attitudes and political behaviour, but not in others, and this is happening in some countries and not in others."

1.1.2 Is there a Gen Z gender divide?

The emerging and quickly growing research field on the so-called Gen Z gender divide reveals mixed findings. The overall evidence may be summarised as follows: young men and women are drifting apart in some political attitudes and political behaviour, but not in others, and this is happening in some countries and not in others.

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In the following, we unpack this mixed evidence, looking at three types of political engagement: young men and women's vote choice; left-right ideology; and attitudes towards political issues such as immigration, economic redistribution, gender equality and feminism.

1.1.2.1 Voting

The most recent evidence on young men and women's voting behaviour across several countries stems from the 2024 European Election Survey, which collects data during every European Parliament election period.[16] The advantage of analysing European Parliament elections data is that these elections happen at the same time in all EU countries, and the European Election Survey provides data on all these countries over the same time period, enabling a comparison of young men and women's voting behaviour across 27 European member states. Furthermore, the European Election Survey asks people to recall how they voted in the last national elections in their country, which may provide some information on vote choice in national and European elections. In addition to asking about people's actual vote choice, the survey asks its respondents: "how likely is it that you would ever vote for party X?" for several parties in the respondents' countries of residence. Respondents answer this question by assessing their likelihood to ever vote for a certain party on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates zero likelihood and 10 indicates that respondents are very likely to ever vote for a certain party. Importantly, this question does not ask about actual vote choice but rather about the likelihood that one would ever vote for a party. It may thus be considered a measure of how favourably a person views a certain party.

Recent evidence from the 2024 European Election Survey shows interesting trends among young men and women: across all EU member states, young men (30 years or younger) are not particularly more likely than middle-aged men (31-65 years) to report that they voted for far-right parties in the last national elections in their countries.[17] However, young men are significantly more likely than older men and women of any age group to indicate a high likelihood that they would ever vote for a far-right party in their countries. This evidence shows that young men today view far-right parties more favourably than older men and women of any age group. However, when considering all EU member states in the analysis, this does not translate into consistently higher far-right vote shares among young men.

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In addition, a recent study examines youth gender gaps in far-right voting in all EU countries (excluding Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta) based on 2023 data from the 2024 European Quality of Government Index survey.[18] It uses data on which political party respondents say they would vote for "if national elections were today" and compute a binary variable for far-right parties, coded as "1" if a party is considered far right in The PopuList Dataset and if it has been in parliament. It finds a significant youth gender gap in Poland, Finland, Romania, Italy and Sweden that is significantly larger than the gender gap among older generations. In Poland, this is driven both by young men reporting more far-right voting than older men and young women less than older women. In Finland and Romania, this is driven by young men reporting more far-right voting than older men. In Italy and Sweden, this is driven by young women reporting less far-right voting than older women.

Further cross-country analysis from ten Western European countries shows generational gender divides in voting behaviour. In addition to the above research, this study considers both voting for green parties and far-right parties and analyses young men and women with different levels of education.[19] The youngest generation considered in this study are the so-called "Millennials" born from 1980 onwards. Today, this includes people in their 30s and early 40s, which other studies would not consider as part of the youngest population group. Still, this study reveals interesting findings: among higher educated young men and women, women are particularly more likely to vote for green parties. There is no difference in the probability to vote for green parties between young men and women with medium or low levels of education.

"Among higher educated young men and women, women are particularly more likely to vote for green parties. There is no difference in the probability to vote for green parties between young men and women with medium or low levels of education."

Conversely, regarding their probability of far-right voting, we do not see such pronounced gender differences. Lower and medium educated people are more likely to vote for the far right than higher educated people, and this is the case more so

> "Among higher educated young men and women, women are particularly more likely to vote for green parties. There is no difference in the probability to vote for green parties between young men and women with medium or low levels of education."

among younger generations than among older generations. However, young men and women with lower or medium education levels are similarly likely to vote for the far right. This study suggests that gender divides in voting behaviour among younger generations are driven by young women with higher education voting for green parties – but not by young men (with lower or medium education) voting for the far right.

In addition to the above studies analysing several countries, single-country studies add to this debate in research. For instance, research on Germany finds that the youngest women (here aged 18-24) were particularly likely to vote for the Green Party in 2021 and for the Left Party in 2025, compared to women of older age groups and men of any age group.[20] Conversely, young men (aged 18-24) were more likely to vote for the far right and liberal parties in 2021 and 2025. In the 2021 elections, the gender gap in far-right voting was not more pronounced among younger voters than among older voters. By 2025, the gender gap in far-right voting was larger among the youngest voters than among all other age groups. However, the study does not show whether this gender gap in far-right voting among young voters is explained by young women being less likely to vote for the far right than older women, or by young men being more likely to vote for the far right than older men – or perhaps by both trends.

Finally, another single-country study of Norway analyses data on teenage boy and girls aged 15-18 from 1989 to 2023, who were asked to indicate their hypothetical vote choice if they were allowed to vote in national elections.[21] The author compares the share of boys and girls who indicate that they would vote for any right- or left-wing party. The data shows that teenage boys and girls today are significantly more polarised between left- and right-wing parties in their vote choice than at any of the previously analysed time points. The teenage gender gap in hypothetical left-right voting was larger in 2023 than at any previous time point between 1989 and 2023. This is driven by teenage boys becoming more likely to (hypothetically) vote for right-wing parties, and especially the far-right party. Interestingly, the same pattern does not show among men and women aged 19-29: Norwegian young adult men and women with voting rights do not diverge more strongly in recent years.

1.1.2.2 Left-right ideology

Overall, there is thus some evidence that highly educated young women are particularly more likely to vote for left or green parties, and young men are more inclined to indicate a higher likelihood that they would ever consider voting for a far-right party. Some analyses of single countries suggest that these dynamics translate into particularly pronounced gender differences in voting among today's young generation. However, comparing young men and women across European countries, there is no consistent trend of such a youth gender gap in far-right voting.

In addition to vote choice, research has investigated whether and to what extent young men and women today diverge in terms of their left-right ideology. These studies usually use a survey indicator in which respondents are asked to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates "left" and 10 indicates "right". Because this indicator of left-right ideology is widely used in surveys, it enables comparisons over time and across countries. It is however noteworthy that the meaning of left and right is not defined in the survey question, and survey respondents may associate different topics and positions with these terms. For instance, research shows that, compared to older respondents, younger people in Western European democracies associate the terms left and right more strongly with political positions on environmentalism and immigration.[22] When comparing how young and old

people place themselves on a left-right scale, we should therefore keep in mind that they may assign different meanings to these terms.

Recent cross-country studies find mixed evidence on youth gender divides in left-right ideology. Using data from 66 countries around the globe, research finds that, overall, younger generations of men and women diverge more strongly in terms of their left-right ideology than older generations.[23] However, gender differences are no different between the middle aged (born between 1967 and 1976) and any of the cohorts who are younger than that. There is no indication that the youngest generation (in this study, those born between 1997 and 2006) particularly diverges from the middle aged in terms of its gender gap in left-right ideology. Still, the study also shows that men and women today more strongly diverge from each other in their left-right ideology among those who are younger, more highly educated, unmarried and without children, amongst others.

"men and women today more strongly diverge from each other in their left-right ideology among those who are younger, more highly educated, unmarried and without children"

Another cross-country study of 32 European countries analyses young men and women's (here, aged 20-29) left-right ideology since the 1990s.[24] Looking at each of these countries separately, the authors find no consistent cross-country trend. The strongest recent trends of a widening youth gender gap are seen in Finland, Sweden and Slovenia, where young men seem to become (slightly) more right wing, while young women become more left wing. In Denmark, Estonia and the UK, there are indications of a widening youth gender gap – not because young men are becoming more right wing but because young women are becoming more left wing. In 14 countries, young men and women hold almost the same ideological positions throughout the analysed time period. In seven countries, young women hold more left-wing positions than men, and this trend has been stable since the 1990s with no indication of recent changes. The authors conclude that there is no clear cross-country trend of a recently widening gap between young men and young women in left-right ideology.

1.1.2.3 Political attitudes

Overall, there is no evidence of a general cross-country trend of young men and women diverging in their left-right ideology. The extent to which young men and women diverge in their left-right ideology depends on the country and other demographic characteristics, such as their education, marital status and whether they have children.

Next to vote choice and left-right ideology, the youth gender gap has been studied with regard to young men and women's political attitudes, that is, their opinions about specific political questions, such as socioeconomic redistribution and public service provision, gender equality, or immigration and liberal democratic principles. Generally, we expect women to hold more progressive/left-wing

"Men and women today more strongly diverge from each other in their left-right ideology among those who are younger, more highly educated, unmarried and without children"

“women born in the 1960s/70s or later hold more left-wing attitudes towards socioeconomic inequality and childcare provision than older women, resulting in larger gender gaps among the middle-aged and young generations compared to the older generation”

attitudes towards socioeconomic redistribution and public service provision or gender equality than men. This is often explained by their self-interest as women and as people who disproportionately rely on public services, for instance, for childcare, and disproportionately work in the public sector.[25] Because immigration attitudes are the most important predictor of far-right voting, and the above research shows some evidence of young men becoming increasingly favourable of the far right, it may be important to also consider potential youth gender differences in immigration attitudes. As regards men and women’s immigration attitudes in general, the evidence suggests that men and women do not hold significantly and consistently different attitudes towards immigration.[26] This well-established literature on gender differences in political attitudes treats men and women as two groups and usually does not distinguish between younger and older men and women. In light of recent debates on the potentially emerging youth gender gap, the question emerges, do today’s young men and women diverge more strongly in their political attitudes than older men and women today or young men and women of previous generations?

Firstly, there is little evidence on youth gender gaps in immigration attitudes. A study of all EU countries, using 2023 data, finds that young men and women do not significantly differ from each other in their attitudes towards immigration.[27] Furthermore, young men and women also do not significantly differ from older generations in their immigration attitudes. Then again, another recent study finds that young men and women differ in their levels of worry about different topics, including immigration: young women (aged 18-29) in France, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Turkey and Ukraine worry more about wars, conflicts and climate change than young men.[28] Conversely, young men in France, Germany and especially in Sweden worry more about immigration than young women. These gender differences are more pronounced among the young (aged 18-29) than among other age groups.

Secondly, regarding attitudes towards socioeconomic redistribution and public service provision, Grasso and Shorrocks compare data from 2008 and 2016 for 12 Western European countries.[29] The youngest generation studied are those born between 1982 and 2002, comprising those who are 34 and younger at the later timepoint of data collection. The authors find that women born in the 1960s/70s or later hold more left-wing attitudes towards socioeconomic inequality and childcare provision than older women, resulting in larger gender gaps among the middle-aged and young generations compared to the older generation.

“women born in the 1960s/70s or later hold more left-wing attitudes towards socioeconomic inequality and childcare provision than older women, resulting in larger gender gaps among the middle-aged and young generations compared to the older generation”

Furthermore, the authors note that the youngest generation (born between 1982 and 2002) stands out: among this generation, gender gaps in attitudes are largest, particularly in attitudes towards unemployment benefits. In other words, young men and women today seem to diverge more strongly on attitudes towards socioeconomic redistribution than older generations.

More research has been done on potential youth gender gaps in attitudes towards gender equality or feminism. A study of all EU countries, using data from 2020, measures agreement with the statement that "advances in women's and girls' rights have gone too far, because they threaten men's and boys' opportunities".[30] It finds that young men (aged 18-29) are most likely to agree with this statement, compared to older men and women of any age group. In particular, young men who distrust public institutions and live in regions with rising unemployment agree that advances in women's rights have gone too far.

"In particular, young men who distrust public institutions and live in regions with rising unemployment agree that advances in women's rights have gone too far."

A later study comprising data from all EU countries from 2023 shows a slightly different pattern for the following indicator: "Women's discrimination is no longer a problem in my country".[31] In this case, young men (aged 18-29) are not more likely to agree with this statement than older men. However, young women are particularly unlikely to agree with this statement, compared to older women. Both studies show larger gender differences in gender-equality attitudes among the young generation compared to older generations. However, depending on how the survey question is asked, it is either young men who reveal particularly conservative attitudes or young women who reveal particularly progressive attitudes.

Similarly, another cross-country study on all EU countries, using data from 2023, finds that young men are most opposed to introducing gender quotas in politics, compared to older men and women of any age group.[32] Conversely, regarding the policy proposal to introduce measures for less gender-stereotypical teaching in schools, young women are particularly supportive and young men are not particularly opposed. Again, the authors show consistently larger gender gaps in the youngest generation compared to older generations in gender-equality policy support. This youth gender gap is sometimes driven by young men's stronger conservatism and sometimes driven by young women's stronger progressivism, depending on the specific gender-equality policy. Furthermore, the authors find that young men particularly oppose gender quotas (but not school reforms for less gender-stereotypical teaching) if they have low income and education levels or reside in a region where young women more strongly outperform young men in terms of their educational attainment.

These findings on youth gender gaps in gender-equality attitudes across all EU countries are consistent with findings from single-country studies. Research on South Korea finds that, when primed to think about women as competitors on the labour market, young men (younger than 40) particularly believe that gender quotas in politics will decrease men's status.[33] Older South Korean men, in turn, do not react to this gender competition notion and do not believe that gender quotas will decrease men's status. Furthermore, an analysis of German data from 2022 finds that, compared to respondents older than 50, the youngest cohort (aged between 16 and 29) reveals larger gender differences in attitudes towards contemporary public debates on sexism and gender quotas.[34] This youth gender gap is driven by young women holding more progressive attitudes than older women, but not by young men holding more conservative attitudes than older men.

"In particular, young men who distrust public institutions and live in regions with rising unemployment agree that advances in women's rights have gone too far."

> "… young women today hold more progressive attitudes than young men on political questions that align with their self-interest (gender quotas, debates on sexism) but not necessarily on other political questions."

The largest gender gap appears between higher educated young women and medium educated young men. Interestingly, the study does not find evidence of similar youth gender gaps for issues related to transgender rights, gender-inclusive language, homosexuality and anti-racist affirmative action. The author suggests that young women today hold more progressive attitudes than young men on political questions that align with their self-interest (gender quotas, debates on sexism) but not necessarily on other political questions.

"… young women today hold more progressive attitudes than young men on political questions that align with their self-interest (gender quotas, debates on sexism) but not necessarily on other political questions."

Finally, the above-cited study on hypothetical vote choice of teenage boys and girls in Norway also shows that teenage boys aged 15-18 are more likely than all other age groups considered to agree that "gender equality has gone too far".[35] Around 24% of 15-to-18-year-old Norwegian boys agree with this statement, compared to around 3% of 15-to-18-year-old girls. In comparison, among the 19-29 year olds, around 14% of men and around 2% of women agree with this statement. The gender gap shrinks even further among older age groups.

These studies suggest that youth gender gaps are most pronounced in attitudes towards gender equality. In particular, young women seem to favour gender equality when it aligns with their self-interest. Conversely, young men seem to fear that gender-equality measures come at the expense of their own interest.

1.1.2.4 Evidence on the youth gender divide in a nutshell

Overall, this emerging line of research reveals mixed evidence. Youth gender gaps seem to depend on the country and variable analysed. While studies on vote choice and left-right ideology find less consistent evidence of a youth gender divide, studies on political attitudes towards gender equality in particular reveal the most consistent youth gender divides. Among these analyses, some suggest that young women's more progressive attitudes are the driver of the gender divide, while others reveal that young men's more conservative attitudes drive the gender divide. Socioeconomic indicators, such as education, income, unemployment and labour market competition, seem to affect the gender divide. At least two important questions emerge from this state of the art: (1) why do we see youth gender divides in some countries and some variables but not in others; and (2) what are mechanisms driving these youth gender divides?

1.2 Relevant theoretical approaches for explaining potential Gen Z gender divides

The following section develops several theoretical approaches for explaining potential divides between young men and women today. These include the reasoning that young men and women differently benefit from the modernising and liberalising trends of the past decades in Western societies. Furthermore, young women today outperform men in terms of higher educational attainment and are advancing on the entry-level labour market. Additionally, gender differences in social media consumption may contribute to explaining why young men and women may be drifting apart in their political behaviour – especially in contexts where political parties increasingly discuss political questions related to gender.

1.2.1 The gendered consequences of modernising and liberalising societies

A tradition of research on political culture and progressive value change argues that, in economically advanced democracies, such as Western European democracies, younger generations become more progressively socialised relative to older generations because technological advancements, improvements in human development, secularisation and improvements in equal opportunities improve younger generations' levels of material and intellectual resources, individual opportunities, and freedom of expression relative to older generations.[36] In this case, this research would expect Gen Z women and men in economically advanced democracies to converge as relatively progressive in their voting, ideology and political attitudes.

However, this research does not consider the rather stark gender differences in improvement in resources, opportunities and autonomy that these societal changes generate for young women and men relative to their female and male counterparts of previous generations. Today, young women do relatively better than their mothers and grandmothers, while young men do not experience the same degree of improvement relative to their fathers and grandfathers in terms of resources, opportunities and autonomy.

"Today, young women do relatively better than their mothers and grandmothers, while young men do not experience the same degree of improvement relative to their fathers and grandfathers in terms of resources, opportunities and autonomy."

Through erosion of the patriarchal, male dominance of social structures, the youngest generations increasingly inherit societies marked by declines in men's privileged access to economic and educational resources, labour market opportunities, and societal and household decision-making power. As a result, young men may be more vulnerable to perceptions of progressive societal change as being threatening and may stagnate in their progressivism or even move towards more conservatism relative to young women.[37] Contextual variation may dampen or amplify this potential vulnerability.[38] Contexts with higher levels of economic security and lower levels of elite/media cueing on the loss of men's status will likely result in young men being less vulnerable to threat perception of progressive societal change. On the flip side, economic insecurity and elite/media

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"… economic insecurity and elite/media cueing on the loss of men's status will likely result in more young men feeling threatened by progressive societal change, …"

cueing on the loss of men's status will likely result in more young men feeling threatened by progressive societal change, especially if young women are outperforming young men in terms of educational achievement.[39]

"… economic insecurity and elite/media cueing on the loss of men's status will likely result in more young men feeling threatened by progressive societal change, …"

1.2.2 Young women today outperform young men in terms of educational and labour market performance

Gen Z women are more likely than men to complete higher education across most European countries and are particularly more likely to complete higher education in so-called cultural/communicative educational fields, which are related to sociocultural progressiveness on political questions including feminism, environmentalism and immigration, compared to more male-dominated economic/technical educational fields.[40] Higher education correlates with progressive political orientations, particularly among highly educated young women who are more likely to vote for green parties.[41] In contrast, lower educational attainment among some young men correlates with anti-establishment and conservative leanings, often tied to perceived economic and social marginalisation.[42] In addition, in a few EU countries, young women now earn more than men their age, and young men outnumber women outside the workforce for the first time.[43] This new generational gender gap in educational attainment, and in some countries in entry-level labour market performance as well, may be part of the explanation for observed generational gender gaps in voting, political ideology or political attitudes. Given that the degree to which women outperform men in terms of educational attainment and labour market performance differs across countries and subnational regions, this factor may help explain geographical differences in the Gen Z gender divide in voting, political ideology or political attitudes.[44]

"this new generational gender gap in educational attainments, and in some countries in entry-level labour market performance as well, may be part of the explanation for observed generational gender gaps in voting, political ideology or political attitudes"

"this new generational gender gap in educational attainments, and in some countries in entry-level labour market performance as well, may be part of the explanation for observed generational gender gaps in voting, political ideology or political attitudes"

1.2.3 Gender differences in social media consumption

Furthermore, the rise of social media is a technological advancement that has profoundly impacted the socialisation of the youngest generation in economically advanced democracies. The effects of social media consumption among Gen Z are sharply gendered. Far-right parties and influencers are more likely to target and mobilise young men to adopt alt-right, misogynist and anti-feminist attitudes and behaviours.[45] In contrast, through the #MeToo movement and similar feminist online mobilisations, social media disproportionately exposed young women to the pervasiveness of sexual discrimination, underscoring the importance of advancing gender equality.[46] This movement generated an important change in feminist social activism and awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment of women and girls in economically advanced democracies. In turn, these feminist mobilisations have been argued to provoke increased sexism and a higher likelihood to vote for the far right among those who hold more conservative views on gender equality.[47] Online feminist mobilisations and misogynist counter-mobilisations, paired with algorithms that differently target men and women, may thus contribute to explaining generational gender gaps in voting, political ideology or political attitudes.

"Online feminist mobilisations and misogynist counter-mobilisations, paired with algorithms that differently target men and women, may thus contribute to explaining generational gender gaps in voting, political ideology or political attitudes."

Yet, given the global nature of social media, these online mobilisations and counter-mobilisations are unable to explain cross-country or cross-regional variation in Gen Z gender divides. To explain such geographical differences in the observed phenomenon, the above-mentioned contextual factors relating to economic security, women's educational achievements, and the growing discussion on feminism and masculinity by political parties may constitute a more fruitful research avenue. Over the past decade, parties of various party families have increasingly emphasised political questions related to gender, feminism and masculinity, albeit with different political goals.[48] While such politicisation may not explain why young men and women particularly drift apart in their political views, compared to older men and women, country differences in how political parties discuss questions related to gender may help explain country differences in whether and how young men and women are drifting apart in their political behaviour.

"Online feminist mobilisations and misogynist counter-mobilisations, paired with algorithms that differently target men and women, may thus contribute to explaining generational gender gaps in voting, political ideology or political attitudes."

Overall, little is known about why we see young men and women drifting apart in some countries – and not others – and in some political views and kinds of political behaviour but not in others. In this chapter, we have briefly suggested several possible explanations, including the gendered consequences of modernising and liberalising societies, young women and men's educational and labour market performances, and gender differences in social media consumption. Following this review of relevant research and exploration of possible theoretical research avenues, we next investigate recent survey data from various European countries for contemporary gender and age patterns in voting, ideology and political attitudes. In doing so, we provide a broad overview of the state of current gender differences in young men and women's political behaviour across various European countries.

2. IS THERE A GEN Z GENDER DIVIDE? WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Authors: Amy Alexander, Nicholas Charron, Gefjon Off

To what extent is there a Gen Z gender divide? Before delving into the qualitative focus group analyses of Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden, this chapter provides an overview of quantitative survey data on left-right ideology, gender-equality attitudes, and voting patterns of men and women across different age groups in Europe and the five studied countries in particular.

2.1 Sample, data and estimation

This section provides a brief description of the data, sample and methods used in the quantitative survey data analyses, as well as an overview of empirical findings. More information on this is reported in the Annex. The source of the data is the ESS, a semi-annual, cross-country survey administered in almost all European countries from 2002 to 2024.[49] Respondents are asked a host of questions, including political and social attitudes, confidence in institutions and a battery of demographic background questions. The analysis relies on two ESS sources:

1. a survey battery with the same questions going back to 2002 to elucidate trends over time, whereby we draw on several variables from the "politics" theme of the ESS time series; and

2. as the 2024 ESS survey wave contains a battery of questions specifically on gender attitudes, such as workplace gender equality, perceptions of equal treatment of men and women by state institutions, and preferences of gender equality across society, we draw on the 2024 cross section of survey data for a more in-depth analysis of recent years.

Our sample relies on all available respondents from the 27 EU countries plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the UK. In addition to the full European sample models, we report individual country models for the five selected case-study countries within the EqualiZe project: Germany; Greece; Poland; Spain; and Sweden.

Our main explanatory variables are respondent age group and gender. In addition, we include a variable for the respondent's socioeconomic status, which is found to be linked to partisanship, political attitudes and electoral participation.[50] To measure socioeconomic status, we use the respondent's mother's level of education (tertiary or higher = "1", and "0" if otherwise).[51] The mother's level of education is used rather than the father's, as the mother's has been repeatedly shown to be more influential on attitude formation and education attainment of the child and should be particularly influential on a child's gender role socialisation in the family.[52]

Our outcome variables of interest are derived from the literature review chapter. Firstly, we capture left-right ideology via a respondent's self-placement on the left-right scale, whereby "0" is far left and "10" is far right.

Secondly, we analyse the youth gender gap in voting patterns for four party families in the five selected case-study countries:

- social democrats (voters of parties affiliated with the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group in the European Parliament);

- centre-right (affiliated with European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament);

- left/greens (affiliated with Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) or the Left in the European Parliament); and

- far-right (affiliated with Patriots for Europe (PfE), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) or Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) groups in the European Parliament).

Thirdly, we look at the following indicators of gender-equality attitudes from the ESS 2024 survey:

- *agreement: women are treated unfairly in hiring/ pay/promotions ("0" = no, "1" = yes);*

- *good or bad for [country's] economy if women and men are paid equally (1-7 scale, 1 = "very bad" to 7 = "very good"); and*

- *how often women exaggerate sexual harassment claims (1-5 scale, never to always).*

Finally, we look at the degree to which other relevant political attitudes differ by gender and age group, such as attitudes on immigration, redistribution and satisfaction with democracy.

2.2 Empirical results

2.2.1 Left-right self-placement

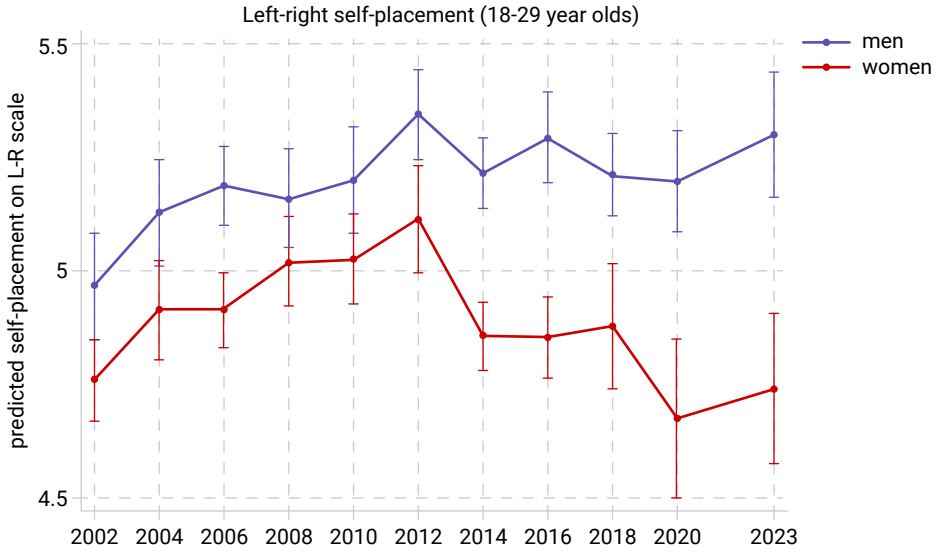
We begin with an analysis of the trends and current gender gaps among the younger cohorts for the left-right self-placement scale. Figure 1 summarises the trends for men (black circles) and women (red diamonds) for 15-29 year olds over time. In this case, we observe that younger men consistently identify as more conservative over time. However, there is a noteworthy divergence in years since 2012 for the European sample as a whole, whereby younger women in particular identify as more left wing, on average, than in previous years. Younger men in 2023 are also more conservative than younger men in 2002 – our earliest time point.

"there is a noteworthy divergence in years since 2012 for the European sample as a whole, whereby younger women in particular identify as more left wing, on average, than in previous years. Younger men in 2023 are also more conservative than younger men in 2002…"

Additionally, Figure 2 elaborates the gender gaps across the four age groups for the 2024 ESS European sample. Interestingly, men of all age groups identify as similarly right wing, while younger women are more left-leaning than older women, meaning that the gender gap in current left-right self-placement is greatest among the youngest cohort.

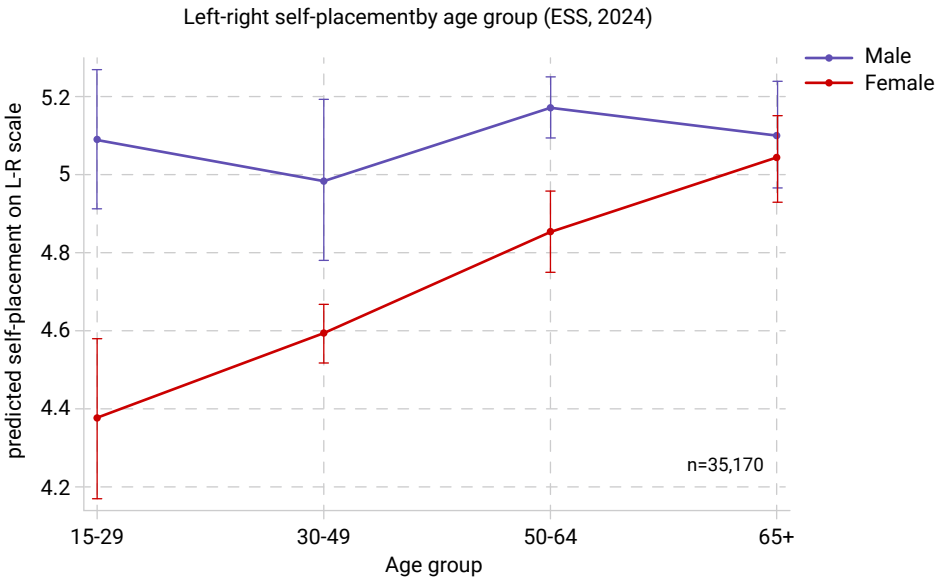
"there is a noteworthy divergence in years since 2012 for the European sample as a whole, whereby younger women in particular identify as more left wing, on average, than in previous years. Younger men in 2023 are also more conservative than younger men in 2002…"

Figure 1. Trends in the youth gender gap in left-right ideological self-placement, 2002-2023.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, country fixed effects, and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Age and gender are interacted with survey year to track trends (older cohorts not shown). Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from ESS.

Figure 2. Left-right ideological self-placement by age and gender, 2024.

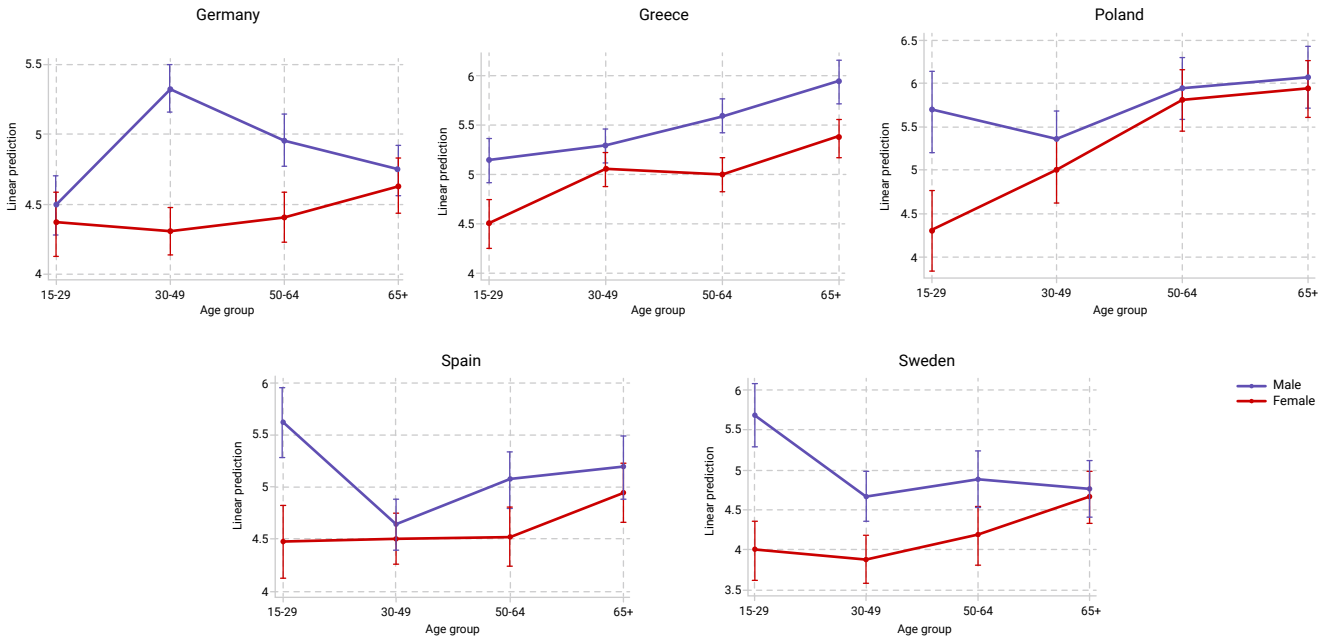


Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, country fixed effects and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from ESS.

Finally, we examine the gender gaps in left-right ideology across the four age groups in each of the five case-study countries – Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden – in Figure 3. In the selected country analysis, countries differ significantly in terms of means and variance on our survey items (e.g., some societies are more conservative/ progressive than others and some are more or less polarised). As explaining the relative size of cross-country variation in youth gender gaps is not the aim of this study, we choose to present each figure by constraining the relevant variation in each variable to each country context to maximise the visualisation of any relevant gender gap, and thus, the range of y axes vary by country due to structural country differences.

In all cases, men tend to identify as more right wing than women. In four of the five cases, the youth gender gap in left-right ideology is statistically significant. Germany constitutes an exception, where the 30-49 year old men and women most strongly diverge in their left-right ideology, and younger men and women identify as almost equally progressive in terms of their left-right ideology. In three of the five cases – Poland, Spain and Sweden – the gender gap in left-right self-placement is the greatest among Gen-Z, that is, the youngest age group.

Figure 3. Left-right ideological self-placement in five selected countries, 2024.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, by country and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown.

The youth gender gap in left-right ideology has grown in recent years – it is greater among young men and women today than in earlier years going back to 2002.

In 2024, in Europe as a whole, the gender gap in left-right ideology is greatest among the young (aged 15-29), compared with older age groups.

In four of the five countries studied, the youth gender gap in left-right ideology is significant and most pronounced in Sweden, Spain and Poland. Only in Germany do we not find a youth gender gap in left-right ideology.

Across all European countries, the youth gender gap in left-right ideology is explained by young women identifying as more left wing than older women, while young and older men identify as similarly left or right wing. In Spain and Sweden, however, we see that young men identify as particularly right wing compared to older men.

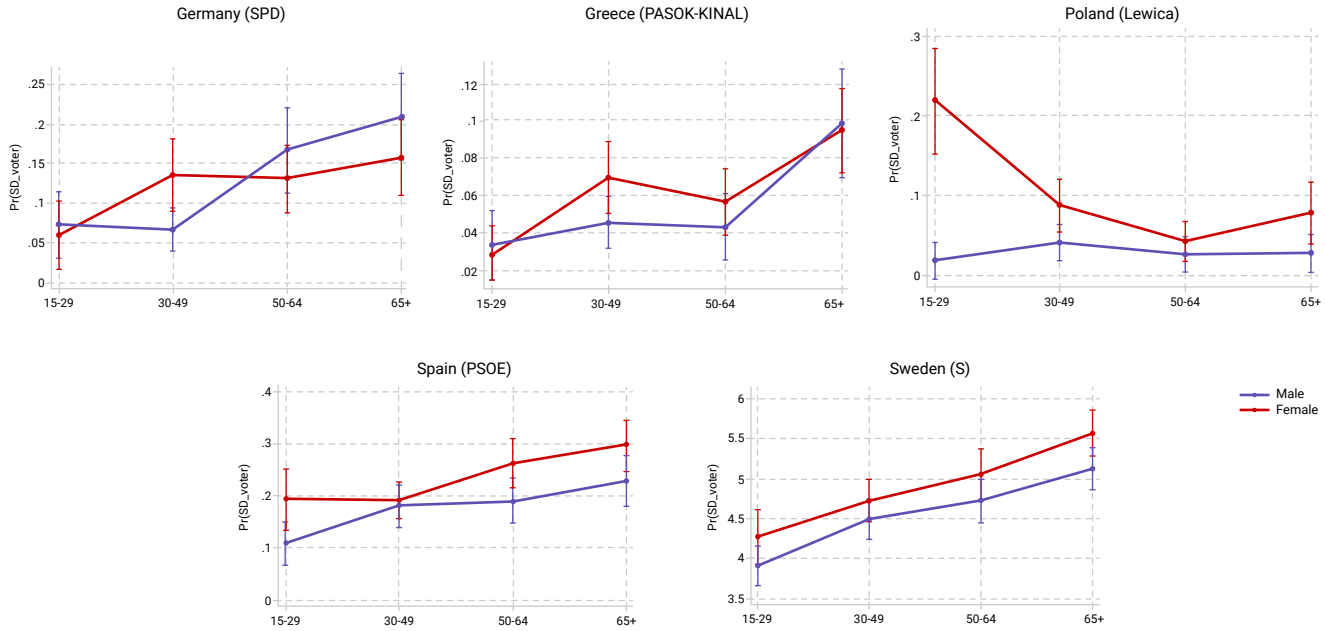
2.2.2 Voting patterns

We now move to an analysis of gender and age gaps in voting for certain party families. In this case, we highlight only the five countries selected and take each case individually. In the ESS survey, respondents are asked which party they voted for in the latest national parliamentary election and are given a set list of existing political parties from which to choose. Our analysis separately considers each party family of interest. We created a binary variable, which equalled "1" if the respondent voted for social democrats and "0" if the respondent supported any other party. We did likewise for centre-right, left/green and far-right parties. Non-voters and respondents under the age of 18 are not included in the analyses, as we are most interested in gender/age partisan divides that most closely reflect the actual election outcomes.

It is noteworthy that the analyses of voting patterns using survey data comes with some limitations. Firstly, people may either not accurately recall which party they voted for in the last election, or they may indicate a different party for social desirability reasons. Because voting for far-right parties is still often stigmatised in many European countries, social desirability bias may particularly lead to far-right voters indicating that they voted for a different party than they actually did. Secondly, some population groups tend to be underrepresented in survey data because some population groups are less likely to respond to surveys than others, and these disproportionately include far-right voters. Therefore, the survey data analysed may partly be biased. In fact, due to these limitations, there are fewer far-right voters in our sample than we would expect by their vote shares in recent national elections. For example, Germans are twice as likely to vote for the AfD in reality than they reported in the ESS survey (i.e., 5.4% in the 2023 ESS sample compared with 10.4% in the 2021 election). Similarly, Swedes are three times more likely to vote for the Sweden Democrats than they report in the ESS survey (7.9% in the sample compared with nearly 21% in the latest election), and the Spanish are twice as likely to vote for Vox in reality than as reported in the survey. Our analysis of voting patterns therefore comes with more uncertainty than the analyses of other variables.

Beginning with the social democrats, Figure 4 shows gender and age effects by country on voting for the party that is affiliated with S&D in the European Parliament. In most cases, women and men are similarly likely to vote for social democrats across all age groups. We observe evidence of a youth gender gap only in Poland in voting for Lewica (left), where young women are roughly nine times more likely than young men to have voted for a social democratic party. In the other four countries, the differences between women and men's likelihood to vote for social democratic parties are smaller or insignificant across age groups.

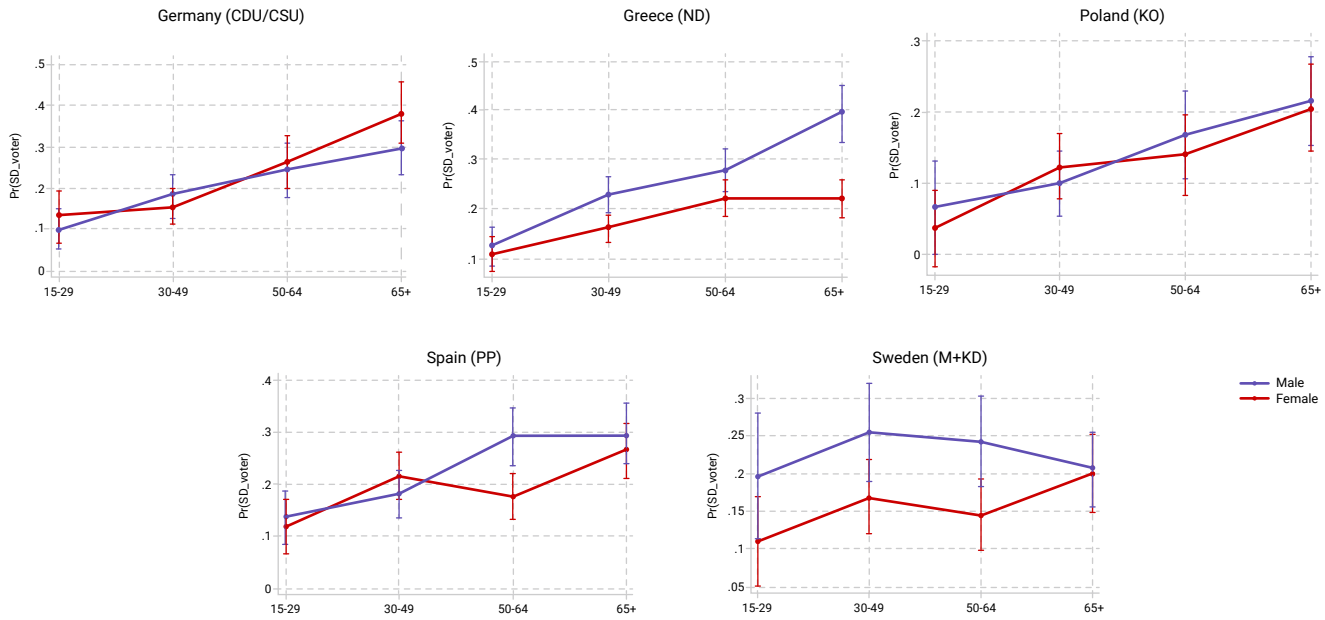
Figure 4. Social democratic voting by country.



Note: Probit regression estimates, controlling for mother's education and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample includes only those that responded "yes" to having voted in the past election and those aged 18 or above.

Figure 5 elucidates the relationship between age, gender and voting for a centre-right party in the five countries selected. Similar to voting for social democratic parties, older respondents are more likely to vote for the centre-right than younger respondents. Furthermore, we observe that men and women are similarly likely to vote for these parties. Across all five countries and age groups investigated, only the oldest men and women in Greece differ from each other in their likelihood to vote for the centre-right.

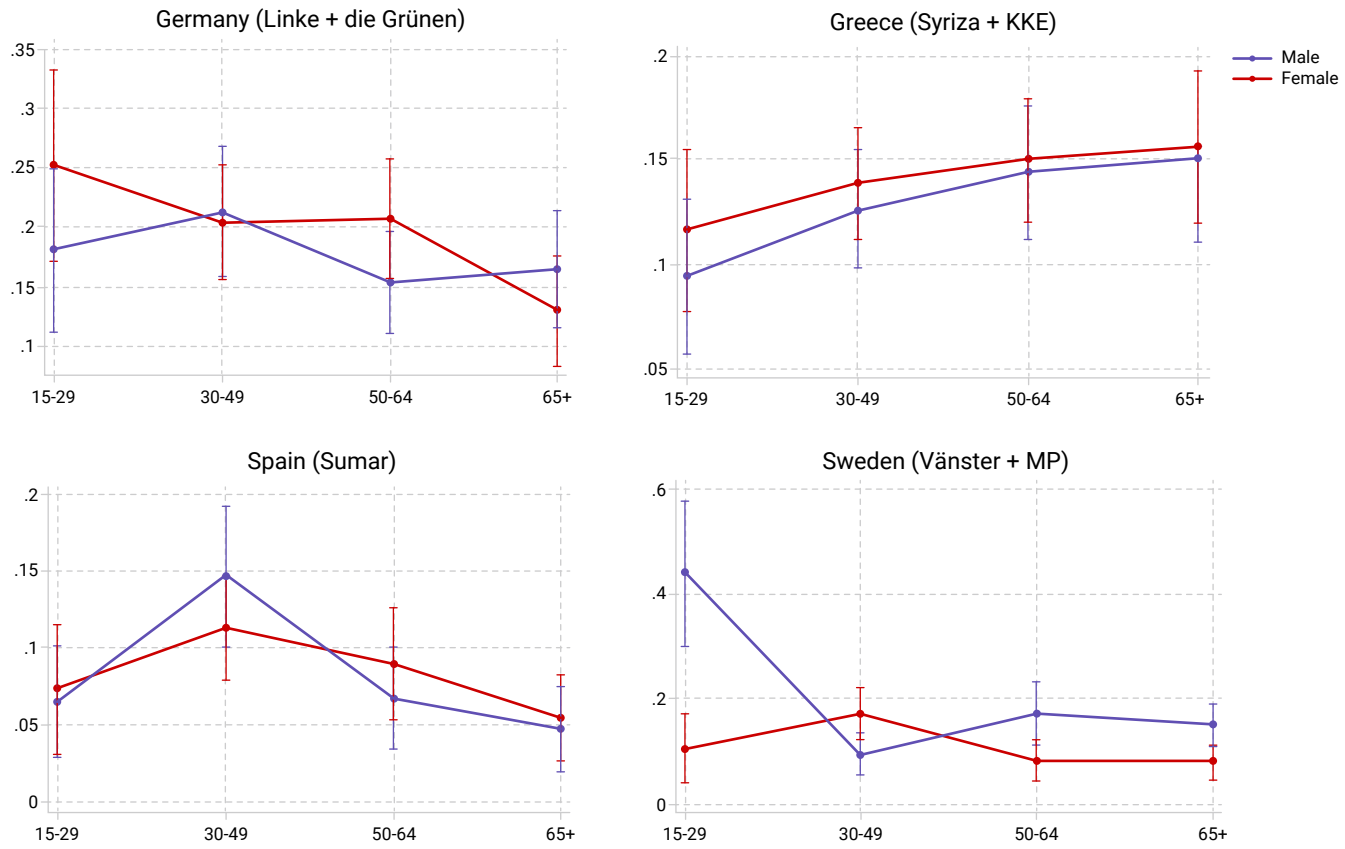
Figure 5. Centre-right voting by country.



Note: Probit regression estimates, controlling for mother's education and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample includes only those that responded "yes" to having voted in the past election and those aged 18 or above. CDU is the Cristian Democratic Party; ND is New Democracy; KO is Civic Coalition; PP is Partido Popular; and M and KD are Moderaterna and Kristdemokraterna, respectively.

Next, Figure 6 highlights the variables on voting for parties associated with the Greens/EFA or the Left in the European Parliament. As Poland does not have a party in this parliamentary group, the analysis is limited to the other four countries. In this dataset, against expectations that young people – and young women in particular – are more likely to vote for Green/Left parties,[53] we observe no consistent age or gender effects in voting for Green/Left parties across the countries analysed. While we do observe a significantly higher probably for Swedish young men – compared with Swedish young women – to vote Green/Left parties, this result should be taken with caution, as the Swedish 2022 post-election polls showed that younger women were more likely than younger men to vote for Green/Left parties.[54]

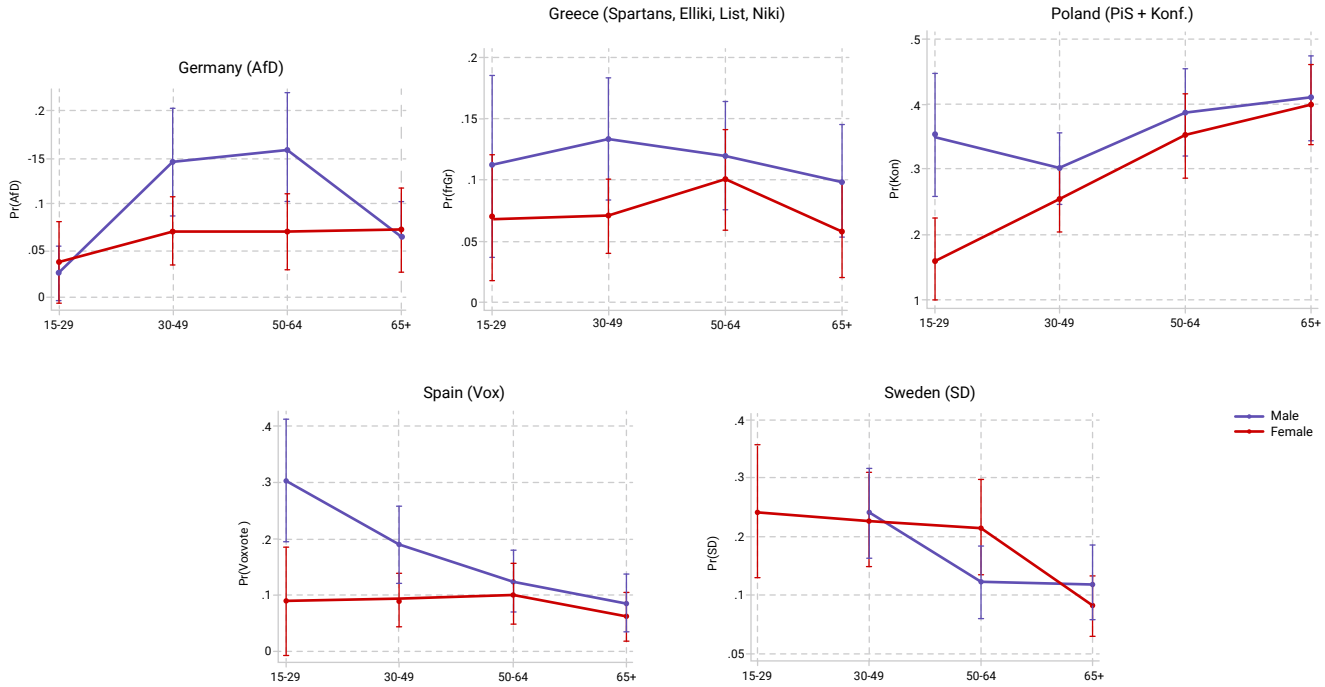
Figure 6. Voting for Green/Left parties.



Note: Probit regression estimates, controlling for mother's education and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample includes only those that responded "yes" to having voted in the past election and those aged 18 or above. MP is Miljöparti (Greens), and KKE is the Communist party.

Finally, Figure 7 shows the age and gender dynamics in voting for far-right parties in the five countries. In this case, the ESS data corroborates the gender gap that has long been discussed in the literature – in most cases, men tend to be more likely than women to vote for far-right parties, irrespective of age. Furthermore, in Poland and Spain, we find a sizable and significant gender gap among Gen Z. For example, young men are roughly twice as likely as younger women to report having voted for either PiS or Konfederacia in Poland, and young men are nearly three times more likely than younger women to report having voted for Vox in the last Spanish election. In Germany and Greece, there is no significant youth gender gap in far-right voting. In Sweden, there is an insufficient number of young men who reported voting for the Sweden Democrats in the ESS survey sample to estimate their likelihood of far-right voting.

Figure 7. Voting for far-right parties by country.



Note: Probit regression estimates, controlling for mother's education and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample includes only those that responded "yes" to having voted in the past election and those aged 18 or above. AfD is Alternative für Deutschland; PiS and Konf. are Prawo i Sprawiedliwość and Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość, KWiN, respectively; SD is Sverigedemokraterna.

With the exception of Poland (the social democratic party Lewica), there are no significant youth gender gaps in voting for mainstream social democratic or centre-right parties among the five countries selected.

We observe a significant youth gender gap in the ESS data for Sweden in voting for Green/Left parties, yet the relationship (men are more likely to vote for Green/Left parties than women) contradicts previous findings from exit polls and should thus be treated with caution.

With regard to far-right voting, we observe significant youth gender gaps in the expected direction in Poland and Spain, whereby young men in Spain are most likely to vote for Vox, and young women in Poland are least likely to vote for the far right, compared to other gender/age groups.

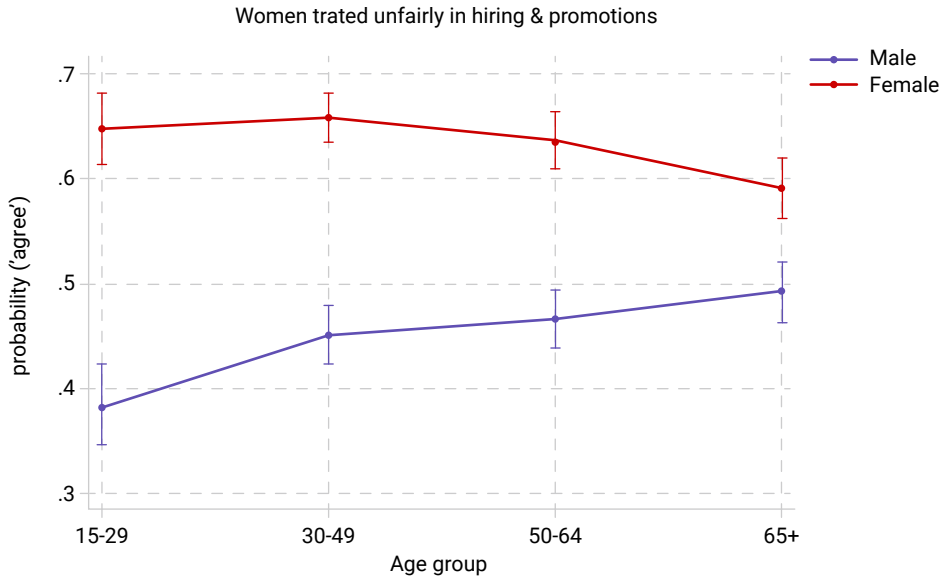
“fewer than four in ten young men agree with the statement that women are treated less fairly in hiring, pay and promotions. Consequently, the gender gap in recognition of workplace gender discrimination is greatest among the Gen Z age group.”

2.2.3 Gender equality attitudes

We now move to the analysis of three survey items on gender equality questions from the 2024 ESS survey. Again, we begin by showing an overview of the results for the European sample as a whole, followed by the individual country estimates for the five case-study countries. Firstly, Figure 8 shows the results for the question on the perceptions of workplace discrimination against women in terms of hiring, pay and promotions. Unsurprisingly, women of all age groups are in stronger agreement that women are treated less fairly in hiring, pay and promotions. Furthermore, women aged between 15 and 29, and those aged between 30 and 49, most strongly agree that women are treated less fairly in hiring, pay and promotions. Conversely, fewer than four in ten young men agree with the statement that women are treated less fairly in hiring, pay and promotions. Consequently, the gender gap in recognition of workplace gender discrimination is greatest among the Gen Z age group.

“fewer than four in ten young men agree with the statement that women are treated less fairly in hiring, pay and promotions. Consequently, the gender gap in recognition of workplace gender discrimination is greatest among the Gen Z age group.”

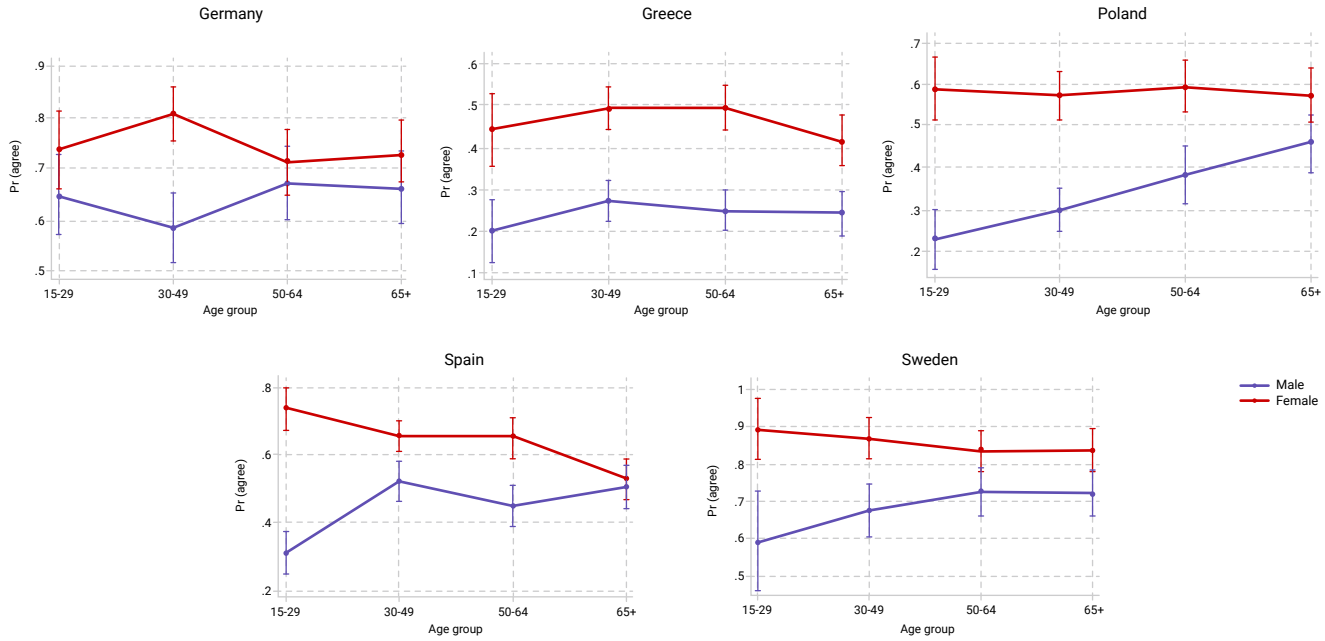
Figure 8. Perceptions of workplace discrimination by age and gender, 2024.



Note: Probit regression estimates, controlling for mother’s education, country fixed effects and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from ESS: *women are treated less fairly than men in hiring, pay or promotions at work in (COUNTRY), 0 = no, 1 = yes.*

Figure 9 illustrates the results by country for the case study countries. We observe significant youth gender gaps in four of the five countries, with again, the only exception being Germany. While the gender gap in Greece is relatively constant across age groups, again, the youth gender gap is greatest in Poland, Spain and Sweden.

Figure 9. Perceptions of workplace discrimination by age and gender for five countries, 2024.



Note: Probit regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, country fixed effects and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from ESS: *women are treated less fairly than men in hiring, pay or promotions at work in (COUNTRY), 0 = no, 1 = yes.*

Next, in Figures 10 and 11, we assess gender gaps across age groups on a question concerning whether respondents perceive equal pay for men and women as beneficial for a country's economy. Figure 10 summarises the results across the entire sample in Europe. Again, we observe that women of all age groups view equal pay more favourably than men of all age groups, and the gender gap is largest among the Gen Z age group. Young men are least inclined to perceive that equal pay has economic benefits for one's country as a whole.

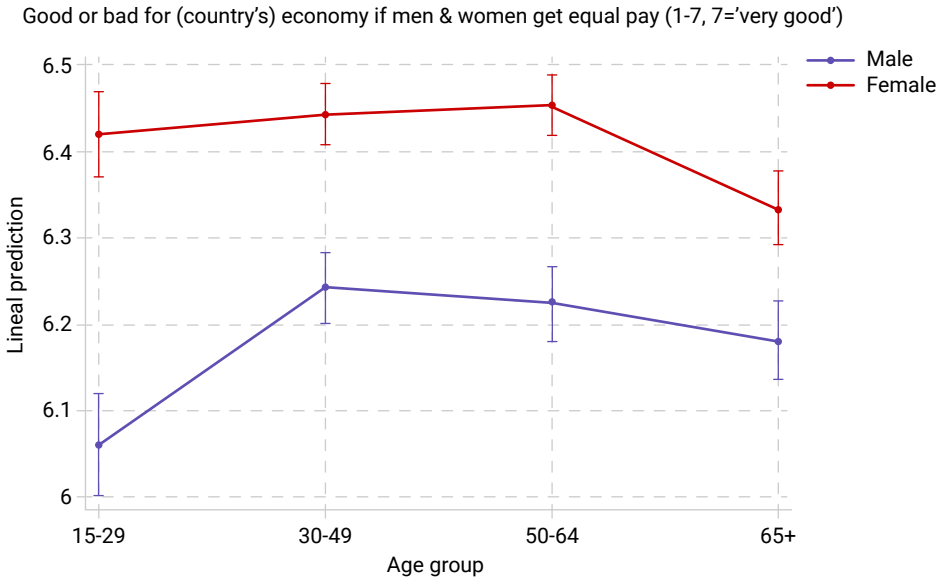
"we observe that women of all age groups view equal pay more favourably than men of all age groups, and the gender gap is largest among the Gen Z age group. Young men are least inclined to perceive that equal pay has economic benefits for one's country as a whole."

Figure 11 elucidates that the gaps are consistent within the five countries selected. A significant youth gender gap is observed in four of the five countries – while there is a youth gap in Spain, it is only significant at the 90% level of confidence. However, in Germany, Greece, Poland and Spain, young respondents diverge rather little from older respondents in their attitudes towards equal pay. Sweden is an exception: here, the youth gender gap

> “we observe that women of all age groups view equal pay more favourably than men of all age groups, and the gender gap is largest among the Gen Z age group. Young men are least inclined to perceive that equal pay has economic benefits for one’s country as a whole.”

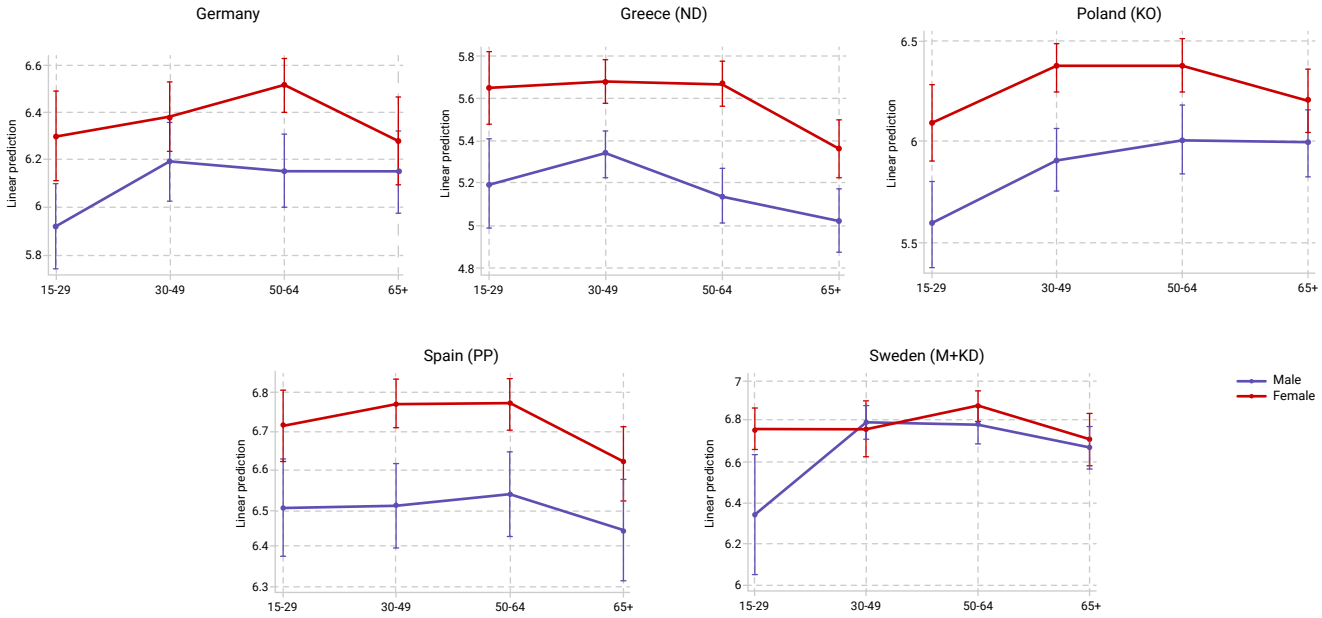
is widest and young men particularly diverge from older men in their attitudes towards equal pay. It is however noteworthy that Swedish young men also reveal a relatively large variation in their attitudes towards equal pay, that is, there seems to be more disagreement among young men on whether equal pay is good for a country’s economy.

Figure 10. Attitudes toward equal pay by age and gender, 2024.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother’s education, country fixed effects and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from the 2024 ESS.

Figure 11. Attitudes toward equal pay by age and gender for five countries, 2024.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, by country and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown.

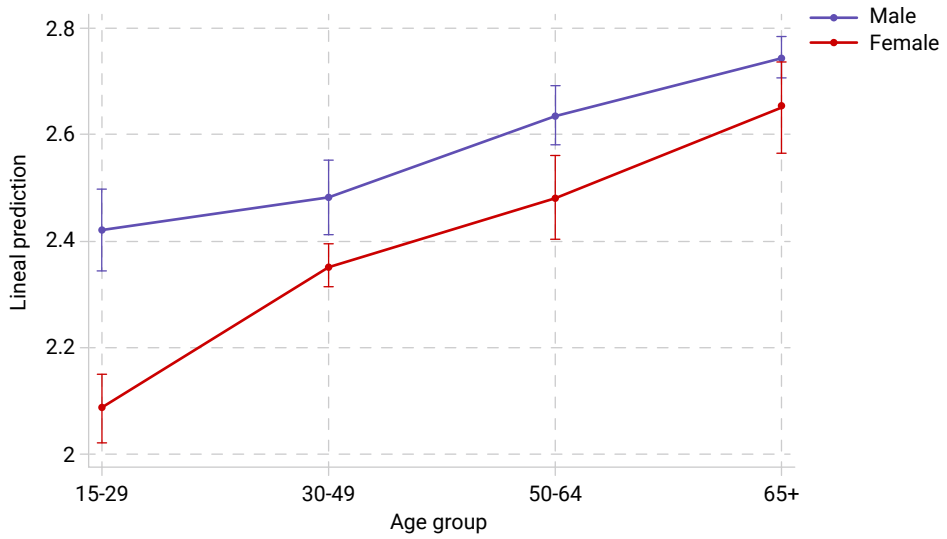
Finally, Figures 12 and 13 show the results for a question on the extent to which respondents believe that women exaggerate claims of sexual harassment in the workplace. In this case, age is positively correlated with agreement with the question for both men and women – older respondents are, on average, more likely to believe that sexual harassment claims are exaggerated. Again, there is a constant gender gap, with men agreeing more strongly than women across all age groups (yet insignificantly so for those aged 65+), and the gender gap is largest among Gen Z. This time, young women are particularly less inclined to believe that women's sexual harassment claims are exaggerated, relative to older women and men of any age group.

"young women are particularly less inclined to believe that women's sexual harassment claims are exaggerated, relative to older women and men of any age group."

"young women are particularly less inclined to believe that women's sexual harassment claims are exaggerated, relative to older women and men of any age group."

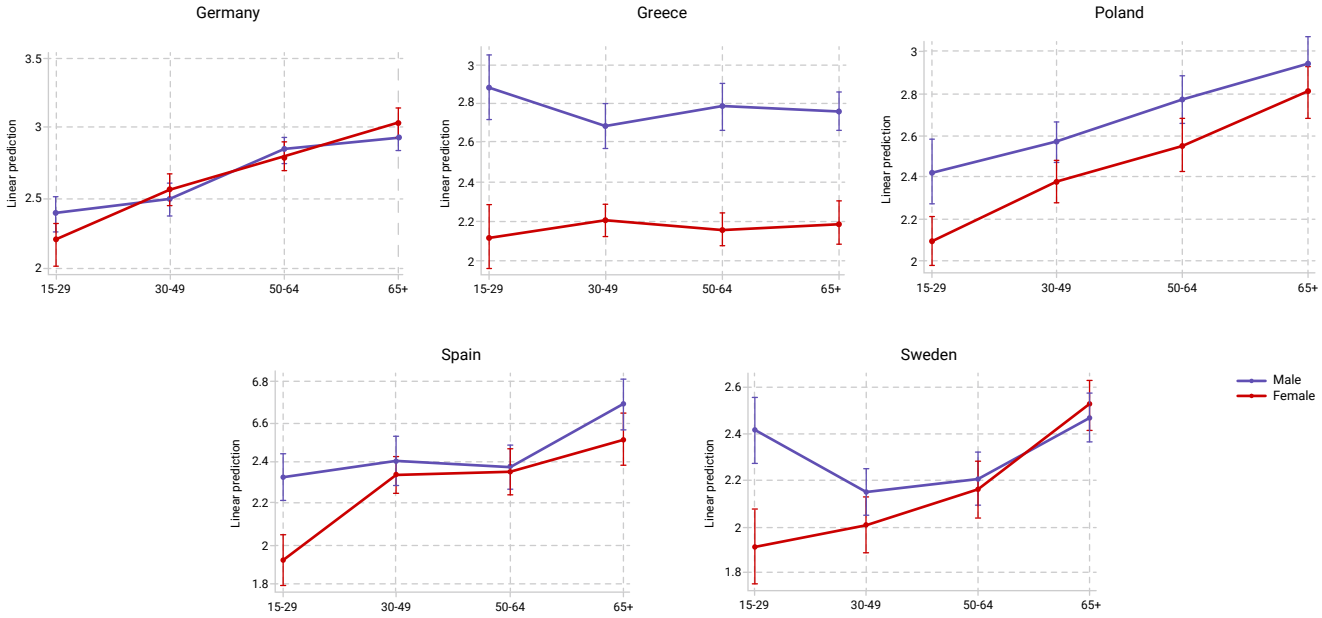
Figure 13 illustrates the findings by country for the five countries selected. In this case, we see more differences between the countries. Firstly, we see that the gender gap is most pronounced among the youngest age group, particularly in Spain and Sweden. Interestingly, older men and women in Spain and Sweden make similar assessments of the validity of women's sexual harassment claims – only in the youngest age group do men and women significantly diverge in their assessments. In Poland and Greece, young men and women diverge only slightly more strongly than older men and women in their perceptions of the validity of women's sexual harassment claims. Finally, in Germany, men and women across all age groups make similar assessments of the validity of women's sexual harassment claims. While younger respondents are less likely to consider women's sexual harassment claims as exaggerated than older respondents in Germany, there are no significant gender gaps in these response patterns.

Figure 12. Perceptions of how often women exaggerate sexual harassment, 2024.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, country fixed effects and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from ESS: *how often women exaggerate claims of sexual harassment in the workplace (1-5, never-always).*

Figure 13. Perceptions of how often women exaggerate sexual harassment for five countries.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother's education, by country and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown.

Across Europe, there is a gender gap in attitudes about workplace gender discrimination, equal pay and perceived validity of sexual harassment claims across all age groups; the gender gap is largest among the youngest age group.

In Greece, young men and women diverge only slightly more strongly in their gender-equality attitudes than older men and women.

Germany is an outlying case: there is no youth gender gap in respondents' recognition of gender workplace discrimination and respondents' assessment of sexual harassment claims. The youth gender gap in attitudes towards equal pay is significant but small. Furthermore, Gen Z does not distinguish itself from older age groups in terms of the size of its gender gap. Instead, men and women of older age groups often diverge more strongly in their attitudes towards these questions.

In Poland, there is a significant youth gender gap on all investigated gender-equality questions. The youth gender gap is greatest and most distinct from gender gaps among older respondents for questions of whether women are treated unfairly in the workplace.

In Spain, there is a youth gender gap in recognition of workplace discrimination and sexual harassment. Regarding attitudes towards equal pay, young men and women do not diverge more strongly in their attitudes than older men and women.

In Sweden, the youth gender gap is significant and most pronounced for all three gender equality questions, compared with all older age groups and the four other countries assessed.

2.2.4 Other political attitudes

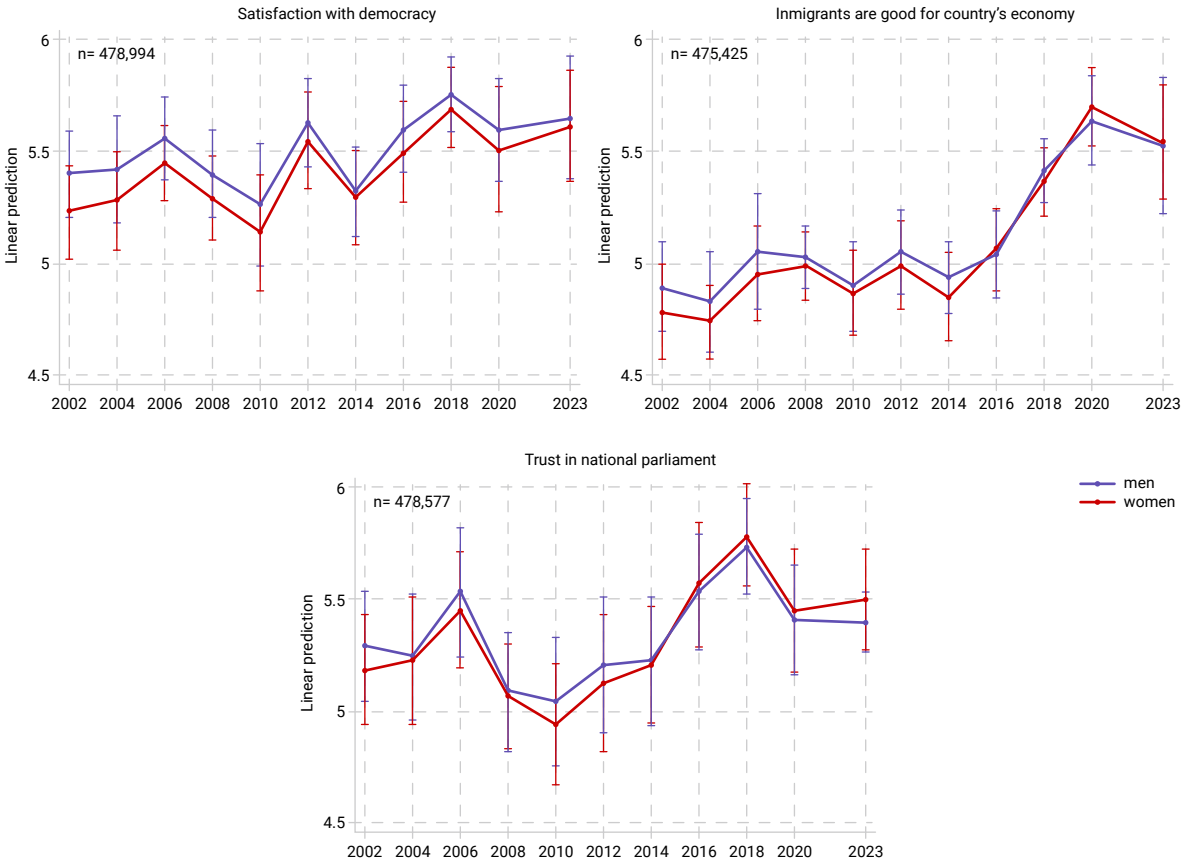
Finally, we investigate whether the youth gender gaps found in the previous sets of analyses correspond to larger trends in youth-gender gaps with respect to other political questions. In this case, we again take advantage of the time-series component of the ESS data and look at trends from 2002 to 2023 for three questions available over all years of the survey – questions on satisfaction with democracy, perceptions of immigration and trust in national parliaments. Figure 14 illustrates the trends among young respondents across the time series. In no case do we see significant gender gaps among the young – while satisfaction with democracy and trust dip during the 2008/09 financial crisis, both young men and women show an increase in democratic satisfaction and trust in national institutions in later years, although trust in parliament dips again during the COVID-19 pandemic. Attitudes toward immigrants, in terms of respondents' views regarding immigrants' contributions to their country's economy, increase significantly after 2014 and are indistinguishable between young men and women over time. Thus, on questions related to satisfaction with democracy, immigration and trust

> “… on questions related to satisfaction with democracy, immigration and trust in parliament, we do not observe a divergent pattern between young men and women…”

in parliament, we do not observe a divergent pattern between young men and women, as we do with left-right political ideology.

“… on questions related to satisfaction with democracy, immigration and trust in parliament, we do not observe a divergent pattern between young men and women…”

Figure 14: Youth gender gaps for different questions.



Note: Linear regression estimates, controlling for mother’s education, country fixed effects and weighted via post-stratification and design weights; 95% confidence intervals are shown. Sample = all available respondents from EU-27, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Data from ESS (2002-2023). Democratic satisfaction – *“how satisfied with the way democracy works in (COUNTRY)?* (0 = “extremely dissatisfied”, 10 = “extremely satisfied”); immigration – *“immigrants are good or bad for (COUNTRY’s) economy?”* (0 = “very bad”, 10 = “very good”); trust – *“trust in (COUNTRY’s) parliament?”* (0 = “no trust at all”, 10 = “complete trust”).

2.3 Discussion

Overall, gender gaps among young men and women are thus most consistent in left-right ideological self-placement and gender equality attitudes, but less so in voting for different party families. Regarding cross-country differences, Sweden reveals the most consistent youth gender gaps across all investigated indicators, with young men and women distinguishing themselves most strongly from older men and women, whereas Germany does not reveal any such patterns. For Greece, Poland and Spain, we find some less consistent evidence of youth gender gaps – usually with men taking more conservative attitudes than women – that are often more pronounced among the youngest age group.

The youth gender gap in left-right ideology seems to be mostly explained by young women increasingly identifying as left-wing, while young men today do not identify as particularly more right-wing than young men in the past decades. Regarding youth gender gaps in gender-equality attitudes, we more often see a trend where young men hold more conservative attitudes than older men today, while young women more often do not differ from older women in their attitudes. Thus, depending on the variable of analysis, youth gender gaps may be explained by young women's progressivism (relative to older women) or young men's conservatism (relative to older men).

Importantly, this quantitative survey analysis does not tell us why young men and women are drifting apart on some variables, and not on others, and why this differs between countries. To dig deeper into understanding the reasons behind these trends, the next chapter investigates how young men and women in Greece, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden talk about politics and gender equality in their own words.

3. GENDER, POLITICS AND THE NEGOTIATION OF EQUALITY AMONG GEN Z: QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

Authors: Lea Gronenberg (d|part) & Tobias Spöri (d|part)

This chapter builds on the findings of the preceding quantitative analysis by shifting the analytical lens from patterns of distribution to processes of meaning-making. While the survey data identified measurable gender differences in political attitudes among Gen Z, it could only partially capture how young people themselves interpret political developments, evaluate gender relations and make sense of their own social positioning. The present qualitative analysis, therefore, seeks to deepen our understanding of these patterns by examining how young men and young women articulate political values, perceptions and experiences in their own words across diverse national contexts.

The central research question guiding this chapter is how political values differ between young men and young women in Gen Z and which mechanisms may explain these differences. To address this question, the analysis is structured around four analytical dimensions: (1) participants' assessments of the current political situation and their personal life chances; (2) perceptions of political actors and institutions; (3) lived experiences and interpretations of gender equality; and (4) the role of feminism and gender equality as sites of consensus, conflict or backlash. Together, these dimensions allow for an examination that connects subjective perceptions, emotional orientations and broader political narratives.

Broad consensus on equality but gendered differences in salience and interpretation: In the focus groups, young men and women largely agree on the principle of gender equality and share similar experiences of crisis and uncertainty. However, their political values differ in how strongly they prioritise gender issues, how personally they relate to them and how they interpret appropriate responses. Young women tend to see gender equality as more central, connect it more directly to lived experience, and are more open to representation and structural change. Young men, while generally supportive in principle, more often treat it as one issue among many, approach politics in more abstract or performance-oriented terms, and show greater ambivalence toward feminist framing and interventionist policies.

Growing up in times of crisis: Young people's political views are strongly shaped by growing up during multiple crises. Many are pessimistic about the future of their countries but remain relatively optimistic about their own lives. Men and women often talk about these experiences differently. Many young men tend to discuss crises in general or abstract terms, except when they relate them to their future careers. Young women are more likely to link crises to their daily lives, relationships, and personal safety and health.

Frustration with politics: Many young people feel frustrated with politics and have limited trust in political institutions. They often judge political leaders mainly by whether they deliver results. Views on leadership are

also shaped by gender. Some young women stress the importance of female role models and reject the idea that men are naturally better leaders, while some young men express more mixed or uncertain views.

Social media usage: Mixed and ambiguous findings: Social media plays a subtle and mixed role in shaping participants' perceptions: while it serves as an important source of information and arguments, especially for young women engaging with gender-equality content, participants rarely explicitly cite it when explaining gender divides among young people.

Support for gender equality but different priorities: Most young people support gender equality. However, it is a higher priority for women. Many young women see it as a key issue, while young men often see it as less central and sometimes feel that it does not directly affect them.

Focus on individual responsibility: When discussing solutions to crises or gender inequality, many young people emphasise personal responsibility over structural reform. Among many young women, this reflects a pragmatic liberalism: despite recognising inequalities, they often have limited confidence in systemic change, and therefore, focus on individual strategies as being more realistic.

Appeal of traditional family roles in uncertain times: In times of economic and social uncertainty, more traditional family roles can appear attractive, particularly to young men, as they are associated with stability, financial security and protection. However, given current economic conditions, most young people do not see a single-earner household as a realistic option.

Mixed views on feminism: Feminism is generally accepted in principle, but the term itself can be controversial. Many participants reject what they see as "extreme" forms of feminism. This allows some young men to support gender equality while distancing themselves from what they see as radical positions, while many young women see feminism as both politically important and personally meaningful.

3.1 Methodological approach

Methodologically, the chapter draws on focus group discussions conducted in five countries. Focus groups offer a distinct analytical advantage compared to individual interviews or survey methods because they capture not only individual opinions but also the interactive processes through which attitudes are negotiated, contested and collectively framed. Participants respond to one another, challenge interpretations and co-produce meanings, allowing researchers to observe how political ideas are reshaped through social interaction. This interactional dimension is particularly relevant for studying gender and generational politics, where norms, identities and perceived grievances are often shaped through peer discourse and shared or conflicting cultural references.

The focus groups were conducted in autumn 2025 and took place in Berlin (14-16 October), Stockholm (23-24 October), Athens (3-4 November), Warsaw (5-6 November) and Madrid (4 and 6 November). The selection of national capitals ensured comparability across countries by providing access to similar institutional and political contexts, while also enabling efficient coordination of cross-national fieldwork. At the same time, the research design sought to avoid an exclusive focus on highly urban, inner-city perspectives that often characterise capital-based studies. Recruitment therefore emphasised participants living in suburban districts and urban outskirts, based on postal codes, to capture perspectives beyond cosmopolitan city-centre milieus and include experiences more reflective of broader socio-spatial contexts within each country.

In all cities, three focus groups were conducted following a standardised threefold design consisting of one mixed-gender group, one women-only group and one men-only group. This structure enabled systematic comparison between interactive gender dynamics and gender-specific discursive spaces across national settings. Only in Germany was the design expanded to include five focus groups in total to explore potential age-related differences within Gen Z. Alongside the women-only and men-only groups (aged 18-29), three mixed-gender groups were conducted with differentiated age compositions (one group aged 18-29, one aged 18-24 and one aged 25-29), allowing exploratory insights into intra-generational variation while maintaining cross-country comparability.

Mixed-gender groups enabled observation of interaction patterns such as agreement, disagreement, and shared or contested concerns between young women and men. Gender-homogeneous groups created spaces for more open expression: women-only groups supported discussion of gendered experiences, while men-only groups encouraged reflection on gender and politics without female peers present. Across locations, participants aged 18-29 were recruited to ensure diversity in education, occupation, party preference, care responsibilities and age within the cohort. All names have been changed to protect privacy.

All focus groups were moderated by researchers with strong backgrounds in the social sciences, ensuring methodological consistency and sensitivity in facilitating discussions on potentially contested topics such as gender relations and political values. d|part was responsible not only for coordinating the focus groups and overseeing participant recruitment through a professional service provider, but also for ensuring cross-national comparability of implementation. Preparatory workshops were held with moderators prior to fieldwork to align methodological procedures, moderation strategies and analytical objectives. In addition, d|part monitored the focus group process throughout the field phase to maintain quality standards and consistency across countries.

3.2 Young adults' perceptions of society and self: Shaped by multiple crises and individual coping under structural constraints

Most young adults across Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden demonstrate a high degree of political attentiveness and express strong awareness of multiple crises when assessing their societies. Across national contexts, participants often mention the interplay between societal conditions and personal trajectories, framing their reflections in terms of both societal constraints and individual agency. Their evaluations reveal not only the societal challenges they face, like unstable job markets, housing shortages, social inequality, political problems, and domestic and international security concerns, but also the hopes, worries and strategies that shape how they deal with these challenges. The large majority of participants evaluate their own personal futures more positively, in contrast to the dominant pessimism regarding the future of their countries.

While the intensity and immediacy of concerns vary across countries, clear cross-national patterns

emerge, pointing to shared generational experiences across Europe.

3.2.1 Prioritised challenges

Participants across genders discuss a broad range of societal challenges, including economic insecurity, housing affordability, political dysfunction, social inequality, gendered disadvantage, social cohesion and polarisation, climate change, and foreign and security policy. These topics were raised spontaneously by participants, without being prompted by the moderators. Although all topics were mentioned, young adults consistently prioritise those with direct implications for personal independence, life planning and long-term stability. Social policy concerns dominated, but climate and security policy were also seen as increasingly relevant to future trajectories, with climate change in particular being highlighted in the German and Swedish discussions.

3.2.1.1 Economic insecurity and housing

Economic insecurity emerges as the most immediate and universally shared concern. Across countries, precarious employment, low wages, and rising living costs are associated with delayed autonomy and constrained life choices. It is important to remember that interviews were conducted in capital cities that are particularly affected by housing shortages and high living costs, which explains the salience of these issues.

Simon (male, 20, Stockholm, mixed group) explicitly links employment precarity to housing exclusion. His statement captures a circular logic of exclusion: without stable employment, access to housing is blocked; without housing security, long-term planning remains fragile:

"You need to find a job and it may be impossible to buy an apartment, because you don't get a job. This is something I worry a lot about when it comes to the future".

Eleni (female, 23, Athens, mixed group) also highlights the personal consequences of insufficient income:

"Even for us – and I live with my parents – €700 [of minimum wage] might not even be enough for me. Even if I don't pay rent because I'm living at my parents' house – if I try to go on a trip, it will only be for a weekend, and even that will be within Greece."

Even though the statutory minimum wage in Greece reached €880 in 2025, her reference to €700 illustrates how perceived disposable income remains limited once everyday costs are considered. Economic pressure thus restricts not only independence but also mobility, leisure and long-term savings, narrowing perceived opportunity structures.

3.2.1.2 Social inequality and gendered disadvantage

Social inequality, and particularly gendered disadvantage, is a central concern, especially among female participants, who raise these topics more often during the discussion without being prompted by the moderator. Sophie (female, 22, Berlin, all-female group) articulates perceived structural imbalance: "A woman can of course get the same job as a man, but she has to work twice as hard and gets paid half as much or something like that".

Lucía (female, 20, Madrid, all-female group), studying aircraft mechanics, provides a stark illustration of embodied inequality beyond salaries and the likelihood of finding a job:

"Mechanics has always been a men's [sic] job: in my base we are 568 people and only 8 of us are women. Since day one I've been 'the one with the big tits in the hangar'. It's constant harassment. Either they overprotect you or treat you badly. And I'm there because I like it and I'm good at it."

Her account shows how underrepresentation translates into everyday experiences of sexualisation, exclusion and defensive self-positioning. While male

participants also acknowledged inequality, they tended to discuss it in broader and more abstract terms rather than through personal vulnerability and consequences.

Ilias (male, 26, Athens, all-male group):

"Someone who comes from a lower socio-economic background will definitely find fewer opportunities available, whereas someone from a higher one will inevitably find things easier. […] The inequality is huge, and there's a real gap in opportunities depending on which social group you belong to."

3.2.1.3 Social cohesion and polarisation

Many participants linked social inequalities to social cohesion. They see cohesion as weakening and under pressure, partly due to inward migration. Often in this context, social cohesion, safety and polarisation emerged as key themes. Swedish participants in particular frequently mentioned crime and segregation as societal challenges that also had a personal impact.

Elias (male, 21, Stockholm, mixed group) observes:

"The integration [of immigrants] has been rather problematic and this has resulted in segregation today".

Within the discussions in Stockholm, both anti-immigrant and supportive perspectives were expressed. While some participants voiced concerns framed in more critical or restrictive terms, others, often women, also highlighted issues of integration but in a different way. For them, lack of integration was understood less as an argument against immigration and more as a societal and institutional failure to provide adequate support and opportunities for migrants.

Migration, integration and racism are also frequently mentioned as polarised topics. In the eyes of many participants, polarisation has become a societal obstacle and crisis in itself. Often, polarisation is described as extending beyond public debate into the intimate sphere of family life and personal relationships. Young adults report that ideological divisions affect everyday interactions, generating tension, caution and sometimes avoidance.

Aleksandra (female, 26, Warsaw, all-female group) recounts:

"When I started seeing my partner, it turned out that his political views were quite different from my father's, and that caused a lot of tension. It ended up with me not bringing my partner to my family home at all. Even if no direct argument erupts, there's still tension – subtle jabs, passive-aggressive comments – but there were also outright clashes over political views in the kitchen."

This diffusion of polarisation into private life affects not only social trust but also emotional wellbeing. Political disagreement becomes a relational risk. Several participants express a desire for depoliticisation and depolarisation, motivated not only by abstract democratic concerns but by the strain experienced within their own social environments.

3.2.1.4 Domestic and international security issues

In many discussions, participants reference increased defence spending, international conflict and global instability as shaping national security and economic stability. Foreign and security issues are particularly salient in Sweden, Germany and Poland, reflecting heightened awareness of geopolitical instability. In Sweden, NATO membership and regional security are discussed in relation to personal responsibility and potential risk.

Noel (male, 22, Stockholm, mixed group) notes:

"Regarding the NATO-membership, we do have a responsibility of backing up NATO in case of a future conflict. It may affect the people here, like the conscripts and the soldiers who are sent to war. Of course there are some worries about the future."

Polish participants across all groups discussed security and geopolitical concerns, as well as personal anxieties about the future. Anti-Ukrainian refugee sentiments often link the war in Ukraine to broader generational and societal anxieties, but these remain separate from the personal uncertainty many participants experience regarding their own life trajectories.

Angelika (female, 25, Warsaw, all-female group):

"I feel reasonably confident about my future. That is, assuming there's no escalation in Ukraine or another global health crisis".

Critical views of the EU were also strongly present, primarily voiced by participants who support far-right parties. In this case, Paweł supports the PiS party. These participants often frame their EU criticism in terms of national sovereignty and dissatisfaction with current EU policies.

Paweł (male, 27, Warsaw, all-male group):

"I hope the European Union eventually dissolves, so Poland can regain full sovereignty. We certainly gained a lot from joining the EU, but now it feels like we are heading in the wrong direction".

3.2.1.5 Climate and environmental anxiety

Climate change is especially emphasised in Germany, and to a lesser degree in Sweden, as a long-term existential concern.

Natalia (female, 23, Berlin, mixed group) frames the issue generationally:

"We want to spend a few more years here on earth. If this continues at this rate, it will definitely become a bigger problem for us than it was for our parents".

Although sometimes secondary to immediate economic pressures, climate risk represents a key dimension of forward-looking generational assessment.

3.2.2 Gendered framing of societal challenges

Gender differences are visible less in levels of concern than in modes of articulation. Across countries, men and women generally share similar assessments regarding housing, labour markets, pensions and generational fairness. However, differences emerge in framing or, more broadly, in gendered differences in meaning-making.

Men tend to discuss labour market pressures, economic trends and security issues in relatively abstract or general terms. Women more frequently emphasise the embodied and relational consequences of structural failure, particularly in domains related to healthcare access, mental health, childcare and care work. In these areas, women foreground how institutional shortcomings shape everyday vulnerability, safety and emotional wellbeing.

Katerina (female, 27, Athens, all-female group) explicitly connects structural gender inequality to life planning:

"In a small company, during the interview, they'll ask you if you have children or if you plan to have children. What's the problem with that?"

This illustrates how structural anticipation shapes future decision-making. For issues such as financial and job insecurity or housing affordability, however, this gender difference is less pronounced. In these domains, both men and women articulate similar concerns and levels of urgency.

3.2.3 Tone of assessment across countries

Across all countries, participants expressed varying degrees of pessimism about societal development, though tone differed significantly by context.

3.2.3.1 Sweden and Germany: Pragmatic optimism

Swedish and German participants often display pragmatic optimism or reflective ambivalence. They acknowledge structural problems while maintaining confidence in their own agency and at least a basic level of trust in societal institutions.

Vanessa (female, 24, Berlin, mixed group) reflects this tension:

"I'm an optimistic person and I always think that when you're so far down, you can only go up. But lately I've experienced it differently and I don't really know where to start. Because somehow it always goes in the opposite direction than the direction I would like it to go. Especially when it comes to social policy and health policy. […] I'm actually a very optimistic person. I think being pessimistic doesn't get you anywhere. You have to aspire to the ideal. It's getting more and more difficult, unfortunately."

Elias (male, 21, Stockholm, mixed group) notes:

"Sweden is a very good country and one has to be thankful about all the possibilities we have here. I really don't have much to complain about. The salaries are rather equal; most of the people are earning roughly the same amount of money. Something that may feel unfair, even if you need to take this with a bit of precaution, is that people are born into different families with different social classes and status."

3.2.3.2 Spain and Poland: Pragmatic frustration

In Spain and Poland, participants frequently express pragmatic frustration and resignation. Political dysfunction and polarisation are acknowledged, yet personal adaptability remain central.

Irene (female, 19, Madrid, mixed group) states:

"But as for me, I think that in the end, each individual can find a way to make a living or… I do not know. I think that I will be happy in a few years, but not thanks to politicians, but because of my own actions."

Notably, participants in Madrid, where youth unemployment rates are comparatively lower, express more measured concern and cautious optimism. More pessimistic tones might have been observed in other Spanish regions, suggesting that local opportunity structures significantly shape perception.

Kamil (male, 28, Warsaw, mixed group) remarks:

"PiS accuses PO [Platforma Obywatelska], PO accuses PiS; one side blames the other, then the cycle repeats. This whole spectacle has become so ingrained in my subconscious that it seems almost stereotypical. Someone does something, someone else points fingers, and the whole thing turns into a circle of mutual self-gratification. Yet despite all the accusations, there are rarely any real consequences, and I am not convinced there ever will be. At this point, I watch it with a certain detachment, almost as if it were theatre."

3.2.3.3 Greece: Anxiety and constrained agency

Greek participants articulate, by far, a distinctly more anxious tone, emphasising structural blockage rather than manageable difficulty.

Dafni (female, 23, Athens, all-female group) states:

"Exceptional young people come out – highly educated, very smart, very hard-working – and Greece cannot support them. It offers them a job that is, at best, degrading for the studies they've completed and the capabilities they have, and it pushes them more and more to leave. […] I feel there is no hope and no solutions."

Here, societal dysfunction is strongly perceived not as a challenge to navigate, but as a direct barrier to opportunity. Economic precarity, bureaucratic inefficiency and limited career prospects are seen as constraining agency itself.

Across Sweden, Germany, Poland, Spain and Greece, young adults demonstrate strong awareness and reflexivity regarding the relationship between societal conditions and personal life chances. Economic insecurity and housing constraints dominate immediate concerns, while polarisation, gender inequality, security risks and climate change form a broader horizon of generational uncertainty. Overall, societal challenges are not perceived as abstract policy issues but as deeply embedded determinants of independence, mobility and long-term security.

3.3 Perceptions of political actors and institutions: Performance matters more than ideology

Overall evaluations of political actors are similar across genders and driven by performance expectations. Gender differences are most visible in perceptions of leadership: women more strongly reject the idea that men are better suited to lead and tend to support female political leaders, while men are more likely to express neutrality or conditional agreement with such claims. Beyond this, differences remain limited, with both genders prioritising performance, credibility and effective crisis management.

Performance matters more than ideology: Young adults across Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden evaluate politicians and parties primarily based on whether they deliver results. While some have clear partisan or ideological preferences, most judge political actors by their effectiveness at addressing economic insecurity, social inequality, polarisation and security concerns, rather than by left-right labels.

Broken promises and fragile trust: A widespread critique is the gap between promises and results. Young people are frustrated by unfulfilled commitments, inconsistent decision-making and performative politics. This undermines trust but does not necessarily reduce participation – voting and civic engagement are still seen as responsibilities.

Polarisation and political style: Excessive polarisation, blame-shifting and sensationalism are major concerns. Participants want politicians to focus on problem-solving, cooperation and serious governance rather than performative conflict or political spectacle.

Civic responsibility: While accountability lies with political actors, young adults also emphasise the role of citizens in holding leaders responsible. Participation, voting and awareness are seen as crucial parts of making yourself heard.

Gender and leadership perceptions: When prompted by the moderators, women consistently challenge the idea that men are inherently better crisis managers and tend to support female political leaders. Men are more likely to express neutrality or conditional agreement with male superiority, reflecting persistent gendered assumptions about leadership.

Building on these assessments of societal challenges and life chances, participants turn to the question of political responsibility and institutional performance. Their reflections on political actors are closely intertwined with the crises they previously described. Parties and politicians are evaluated primarily in terms of their perceived capacity to respond effectively to economic insecurity, social inequality, polarisation and geopolitical instability. While ideological orientations and partisan preferences are present, they do not structure the discussion in a straightforward left-right manner. Rather, political actors are assessed through a performance-based lens: do they deliver; do they cooperate; and do they meaningfully address the problems shaping young people's lives?

Participants do not uniformly approach political actors from a position of detachment or indifference. For some, clear partisan preferences and identifiable ideological positions are evident. These participants articulate distinct views on policies and parties and were able to situate themselves within recognisable political camps. Ideological lines matter, particularly when discussing welfare policy, migration, climate or gender equality. At the same time, others appear markedly alienated from party politics as such. For them, party labels carry little substantive meaning, and political competition was perceived less as a contest between alternatives and more as a repetitive and self-referential system. Thus, structured ideological positioning and diffuse alienation coexist within the same generational cohort.

3.3.1 Broken promises, fragile trust and unproductive polarisation: Political parties' lack of output legitimacy in the eyes of young adults

Across both groups, a shared evaluative standard emerges: political actors are expected to produce tangible output and to avoid unproductive or even "destructive" polarisation.[55] The most common critique focused on the gap between promises and results. Participants often criticised political disagreements that seemed performative, mere theatre, without producing concrete actions or meaningful outcomes.

In Germany, **Vanessa (female, 24, Berlin, mixed group)** expresses disappointment while maintaining democratic commitment:

"You sometimes get election promises, that are sometimes not enforced or can't be kept. But I have no alternative now. I would never not vote. I would still vote and hope for the best".

Her statement illustrates a pragmatic form of engagement: trust in specific actors is fragile, yet participation remains normatively binding.

Emre (male, 28, Berlin, all-male group) describes how repeated non-implementation erodes emotional investment:

"Personally, I just find it sad that people always approach things like this [elections] with an idea or a hope. You want to move something, you want to change something and then you always vote for the party, and all the election promises are not kept, for example. And that makes you sad and that leads to fewer people voting because they think that nothing will change anyhow."

Here, broken promises are not merely procedural failures; they undermine belief in the transformative potential of politics. A similar perception emerged in Greece.

Stelios (male, 23, Athens, mixed group) characterises political communication as structurally unreliable:

"The 'fairy tale' goes entirely with the political situation; I feel that you can't trust what they say – whatever they promise won't be implemented".

The metaphor of the "fairy tale" captures a profound scepticism toward political speech itself.

In Poland, **Kacper (male, 29, Warsaw, all-male group)** frames the issue in terms of systematic underperformance:

"The government should really take charge of all of those crises. Every administration comes forward with plans, proposing what they consider the best solutions, yet in practice, they often fail to deliver on at least 70% of their promises, if not more."

A similarly sharp critique is articulated in Sweden. **Liv (female, 25, Stockholm, all-female group)** depicted political decision-making as arbitrary and inconsistent, questioning its seriousness and evidence base:

"It doesn't always feel serious; it doesn't feel evidence-based. Some of their [the government's] choices and arguments feel contradictory to their other arguments, but they still keep all of them, because it sounds nice, despite being contradictory in the future. […] They can sometimes say that they are prioritising a certain issue, but then the money goes to a totally different issue. They are not keeping their promises!"

Across contexts, then, credibility deficits stem less from ideological disagreement and more from perceived implementation gaps. Political actors are judged not by what they claim to stand for, but by whether they can translate commitments into outcomes.

A second recurring theme concerns polarisation and the style of political competition. As outlined above, polarisation is something many participants are particularly concerned about, and they attribute a large share of responsibility for it to parties and politicians. Even participants with clear ideological leanings criticise the confrontational tone and perceive opportunism of party politics.

In Sweden, **Alexander (male, 25, Stockholm, all-male group)** describes a political landscape characterised by inconsistency and strategic repositioning:

"That is one of the problems we have concerning the current debate. It mostly feels like a mess where everyone is turning their coats and switching sides in order to gain more votes. The party that was totally opposed to something prior to the elections has now switched totally and supporting that matter, just in order to gain votes."

Similarly, **Noel (male, 22, Stockholm, mixed group)** emphasises the prevalence of blame-shifting over problem-solving:

"They could stop blaming each other, like the different political parties. They need to start focusing on the actual issues and deal with them. Now they usually just play this blame-game, without solving the problems".

In Poland, **Karolina (female, 28, Warsaw, mixed group)** emphasises that much of the polarisation originates with political leaders:

"It's high time we move past this [polarisation]. Politicians also bear a responsibility to avoid constantly fuelling these disputes, to refrain from continuously blaming the other side, and to stop engaging in relentless quarrels over everything. In my opinion, this behaviour has become distasteful."

In Spain, criticism focuses more explicitly on performative politics. **Victoria (female, 20, Madrid, all-female group)** frames her dissatisfaction in managerial terms:

"*Because I feel everything is leaning towards that sensationalism. Parties are supposed to manage a country so people can live well. I don't believe in anarchy – I think some regulation is necessary. But now parties sell themselves as brands, as stances, rather than as managers. It's not serious politics: TikTok videos; insults in Congress… If someone saw Spanish politics from the outside, they'd laugh."*

Across these statements, polarisation is criticised not because political conflict is illegitimate, but because it is perceived as displacing governance. The expectation is not consensus at all costs, but constructive cooperation and seriousness in crisis management.

Responsibility is primarily attributed to political actors, yet some participants also reflect on civic responsibility. In Sweden, **Lina (female, 21, Stockholm, all-female group)** articulates this dual understanding:

"We are all responsible for participating in the elections and to vote. I have voted for the social democrats, but they haven't really represented the people and the working-class well, not as they used to do in the past. The politicians are also responsible to change the society and keep their promises they gave prior to the elections."

Here, partisan identification coexists with critical evaluation and a strong norm of participation. In Germany, **Sophie (female, 22, Berlin, all-female group)** emphasises that political outcomes are not external constraints but the product of political agency:

"I think you said something like, politicians don't do anything about it. And I think that's such a fallacy that's easy to impose because it's not like politics somehow magically comes before a system and before a state what it then faces and where it has to react to it, but it is the case that this state in which we find ourselves is active and only arises through the actions of politics."

Her intervention rejects narratives of inevitability and reinforces the accountability of political institutions. Across contexts, many participants also invoke the electorate's responsibility to hold politicians accountable as part of crisis management. This strong notion of civic responsibility is frequently mentioned but rarely translated into concrete calls for action.

3.3.2 Gender differences exist: Stronger cross-national variation in political evaluations

Gender differences in the perception of political actors are present but not sharply polarised. Both young men and young women equally express frustration with broken promises, polarisation and insufficient output. One pattern that is evident is that when participants refer to positive examples of political parties or politicians, these are mostly women leaning toward the left who expressed trust in female political leaders. In Sweden, this included Magdalena Andersson, Leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party since 2021; in Greece, Zoe Konstantopoulou, leader of the left-wing, anti-establishment party Course of Freedom (Plefsi Eleftherias); and in Germany, leading politicians of the Left (Die Linke) with strong voices, such as Heidi Reichinnek.

When given the prompt statement: "male politicians are better equipped to handle the major crises of our time", gender differences become apparent. While most women oppose the statement, often strongly, many men position themselves neutrally, and some even support it, highlighting gendered attitudes toward political leadership and societal expectations. This pattern suggests that, even when not explicitly endorsing male superiority, men are more likely to view themselves – or be viewed by others – as competent crisis managers, whereas women more consistently challenge the assumption, emphasising that crisis-handling ability is not inherently gendered. These responses reflect underlying societal beliefs about leadership, competence and gendered norms in political life.

Despite these differences, a broader evaluative pattern emerges across genders: political actors are primarily assessed based on their ability to deliver solutions, reduce polarisation and act credibly in times of crises.

In cross-national comparison, variations in tone are visible. In Greece and Poland, distrust toward political actors is particularly pronounced and often linked to a sense of structural blockage or entrenched polarisation. In Spain, criticism tends to focus on spectacle and performative politics. In Germany and Sweden, participants frequently combine two attitudes: scepticism toward party competition and frustration over implementation gaps, alongside continued engagement with democratic processes and trust in institutions. In other words, criticism of political actors coexists with a sense of civic responsibility, such as a commitment to voting or participation. While this pattern is most visible in Germany and Sweden, elements of engagement and citizens' responsibility also appear in other countries, though they are often overshadowed by stronger expressions of frustration, polarisation or political distrust.

Yet across all five countries, a common expectation emerges: ideological differences matter, but political legitimacy ultimately depends on performance – on whether political actors can move beyond blame, translate promises into policy, and address the crises that shape young people's present and future life chances.

3.4 Gender equality: Shared recognition of inequality, diverging gendered experiences and perspectives

Gender inequality remains a reality: Most young adults across Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden recognise that men continue to hold structural advantages. Women express this more strongly, linking it to personal experiences, while men often focus on individual merit or broader trends. Gender equality is seen as an ongoing process rather than a fully achieved goal, particularly by women given their everyday experiences.

Workplace challenges: Women are widely perceived to face obstacles in pay, promotion, leadership and career choice, often needing to work harder to be taken seriously. Men generally acknowledge these inequalities, though some retain traditional views about women's leadership abilities. Quotas and other institutional measures are supported by some women but questioned by many men.

Care and family responsibilities: Traditional gender roles continue to influence career options and care responsibilities, often to women's disadvantage. Some men feel pressure to earn the main income, even though many view these norms as outdated. The distribution of work and care responsibilities is generally seen as a private decision that couples should negotiate based on mutual agreement and fairness.

Gender-based violence and harassment: Sexual harassment and violence against women are recognised as serious and widespread. Women often share personal experiences, while men acknowledge the problem but sometimes struggle to engage fully. Safety in public spaces and workplaces is a key concern, and participants highlight gaps in prevention, legal enforcement and institutional protection. Awareness campaigns and legal measures are appreciated but often seen as insufficient.

While questions of political performance and legitimacy dominated the previous sections, reflections on the quality of democracy repeatedly intersected with another dimension of fairness: gender equality. Even when not addressed spontaneously, issues of equal opportunity, representation and protection from discrimination form an important backdrop to how young people evaluate society more broadly. Examining how young men and women perceive the state of gender equality – whether as largely achieved, still contested or even overextended – offers deeper insight into their understandings of justice, merit and social change.

The following section therefore shifts the analytical lens from political actors to social norms and everyday expectations. It explores where gendered advantages and disadvantages are perceived; how participants interpret developments in key domains such as work and career advancement, the distribution of care and family responsibilities, and experiences of harassment and gender-based violence; and which values – fairness, individual merit, freedom of choice or security – guide these assessments. In doing so, it highlights not only lived experiences but also the normative frameworks through which young people make sense of gender relations in contemporary society.

3.4.1 Broad agreement on gender inequality but divergent salience

There is broad consensus across most groups that men continue to occupy a structurally advantaged position in society. This assessment is shared by participants of different genders, though it is articulated with varying degrees of intensity. Young women, in particular, express this perception more forcefully and with greater immediacy, often linking it to concrete examples or personal observations.

Beyond differences in intensity, gender also shapes how inequality is discussed. Young women tend to identify specific domains in which they perceive persistent disadvantages, such as career progression, care responsibilities and experiences of harassment, and appear more practiced and confident in articulating explanations and facts. Young men, by contrast, are often less equipped or less accustomed to speaking about gendered inequality, sometimes emphasising individual merit, generational change or isolated cases instead. Finally, there is a noticeable divergence in political salience: for many young women, gender inequality constitutes a meaningful and ongoing political concern, whereas for many young men it appears as one issue among many, and not necessarily a central one.

When participants are explicitly questioned on which genders they consider to be advantaged or disadvantaged, the spontaneous responses show a wide range, as illustrated by these responses from different discussion groups in Stockholm:

Leila, female, 26, Stockholm, all-female group:

"Men! It has always been like that. It doesn't matter if it is in Sweden or in any other country. Men have always had better predispositions; we are living in a patriarchy".

Alva, female, 26, Stockholm, mixed group:

"It's not like all men in Sweden are in a better position than all of the women. It all depends and there are also many other factors that may matter as well – like social class, skin colour etc. But I do think that men in general have a better situation in Sweden compared with women and non-binary persons."

Alexander, male, 25, Stockholm, all-male group:

"We have equality on paper. The legislation is perhaps even favouring women, but it's different in the real world. Women are typically the main victims regarding domestic violence; they can also be discriminated when searching for jobs. This is something that floats under the surface somehow; it's not always easy to notice."

Overall, gender equality is perceived as an ongoing process rather than an achieved goal. Acknowledgement of the progress made is followed by an assessment of the extent to which this standard has already been achieved. This assessment makes a distinction between equal rights in law and the reality of everyday practice.

Samira, female, 27, Berlin, mixed group:

"I think that there is no equality, there are still differences. There are many guidelines, such as the quota for women. And Article 3 of the Basic Law also states that there is equality with regard to gender and religion, etc. So, there are already general requirements in place. People are trying, but it is still difficult to achieve justice."

3.4.1.1 Gender inequality in the workplace: Perceptions and experiences

In most discussion groups, the workplace emerged almost immediately as the first societal domain participants associated with gender inequality. The participation of women in the workforce is completely normalised, and participants of all genders believe that they have equal educational opportunities, yet they perceive obstacles for women in professional life in terms of salaries, treatment and promotion opportunities. One common hypothesis for explaining gender differences among young people is that entering the labour market shapes how gender inequalities are perceived, as many young women begin to experience these inequalities more directly at that stage. This could only be tested in the Berlin focus groups, where participants were divided into younger (18-24) and older (25-29) cohorts. However, there were hardly any differences between the two age groups. In particular, discussions about labour market entry showed no significant variation, as young people are already aware of the additional hurdles women may face when entering the job market, even if they have not personally experienced them.

This broader awareness also shapes how participants relate to gendered divisions in professional life more generally. Stereotypical roles that assign activities to a specific gender, for example, limiting women to professions in childcare or janitorial work, are encountered by participants in their everyday lives but are considered outdated and a mindset of older generations that will be eliminated with generational change. In response to the question of whether and how the proportion of women in certain industries or management positions should be increased, participants of all genders emphasise individual qualifications and efforts rather than institutional regulations. The perception of quotas as a tool for balance is held by some women, while other participants, predominantly men, regard them as unnecessary or a threat to their own position.

Enrique, male, 25, Madrid, all-male group:

"Among younger generations, I think it's completely equal. In fact, 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."

Pascal, male, 22, Berlin, mixed group:

"I'm noticing in my environment that when male boomers are retiring, that means eight out of ten management positions or high positions are occupied by men. When the men are retiring, companies try to adhere to the women's quota or whatever that's called, and they tend hire women for those positions. […] I definitely think it's a good thing to have women in management positions, for me women also belong in leadership positions, but I am at a strange age, because women with the same qualifications are hired now. I would then see myself at a disadvantage."

The overall impression amongst participants of all genders is that women must work harder to be taken seriously in professional contexts. Nevertheless, there are some notable exceptions that reveal the continued presence of gender stereotypes among young men, which occur primarily in all-male or male-dominated groups. With regard to entering the labour market, it is stated that women could rely more on their physical attractiveness than their abilities. Furthermore, a small number of participants generally deny women the ability to hold leadership positions.

Paweł, male, 27, Warsaw, mixed group:

"This may be controversial, but I am not opposed to women occupying managerial roles at other levels – just not at the very top. I think men are naturally better suited for those responsibilities, particularly in terms of strategic management".

3.4.1.2 Gender inequality across care domains

Building on perceptions of workplace inequality, participants also highlight how gendered expectations extend into care and family responsibilities. The challenge of balancing professional advancement with care work emerged as a particularly pressing concern for women, revealing how norms around work, family and caregiving continue to shape opportunities and life choices.

Participants refer to examples in which women were asked about their plans to have children during job interviews and link the low number of women in management positions to a career setback after giving birth.

Panagiotis, male, 26, Athens, mixed group:

"From another friend, another example: she told me she probably lost a job opportunity because she plans to start a family in the future, and exactly because she intends to get pregnant and take maternity leave, they preferred to hire someone else. And they told her this outright – that precisely because she plans to start a family, they didn't choose her."

As the flip side to the disadvantages faced by women in the labour market, a greater pressure on men to pursue a career and earn money is expressed by some men. The conservative concept that men should be the breadwinners and women should run the household is, however, seen as outdated by most participants. In view of the cost-of-living crisis, a traditional housewife marriage is additionally considered unfeasible. Against this backdrop, employment is seen as a burden rather than a form of emancipation.

Ardit, male, 28, Berlin, all-male group:

"Well, as a man, I would rather not tell my wife what to do or recommend it, or I would rather give myself away for the family than force her and having to provide the main income".

While men tend to advocate fairness in the distribution of tasks, women are more concerned with the freedom to pursue their own life plans and careers. In general, however, there is broad agreement that (heterosexual) couples should decide individually how to divide paid work and care work, characterising these arrangements as private decisions for the individuals involved. Social and political factors such as gender norms or the gender pay gap, as well as the risk of economic dependency, although they had previously identified and discussed some of them, are hardly mentioned. Government initiatives, such as promoting parental leave for men, are viewed mostly positively by participants, but they are not really trusted to encourage equality in partnerships and a fairer distribution of care work.

Karolina, female, 28, Warsaw, mixed group:

"If both partners work, responsibilities should be divided equally, including child-rearing. Of course, if a couple agrees that the man earns while the woman stays home to care for the children, that arrangement is also acceptable – but it must be mutually agreed upon. Open communication, setting clear rules and mutual understanding are essential. I think our generation is gradually redefining the approach to sharing parenting and household duties more equitably."

3.4.1.3 Gender-based violence and sexual harassment: Perceptions and experiences

While care responsibilities illustrate how gendered expectations shape life choices and opportunities, participants also highlight that inequality extends into more direct forms of harm and vulnerability, such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Among almost all women, there is broad consensus that these issues remain a serious and persistent problem, with many sharing personal experiences – particularly in women-only groups. Young men largely agree that such behaviour is unacceptable and should be condemned, but their engagement with the topic is more varied: some are hesitant to speak openly, while others raise the perspective that

claims of harassment could be misused. Sexual harassment in the workplace emerges as one of the most prominent forms of discrimination discussed, often described as a widespread or even universal experience for women. This issue is further explored in response to the prompted statement, "women often exaggerate claims of sexual harassment in the workplace", which sparked nuanced discussions about prevalence, power dynamics and the challenges of addressing these violations.

Maya, female, 25, Berlin, mixed group:

"I don't know a single one of my female friends who has never had to deal with this kind of thing at work. When you talk to women, it's a universal experience that really needs to be taken seriously".

Numerous examples that participants of different genders have encountered in their own work experience or personal environment confirm the prevalence.

Emilia, female, 23, Warsaw, all-female group:

"*Personally, in most of the workplaces I've been in, the director-level positions were held by men. I encountered a variety of situations, and at one job, I had to resign because of workplace harassment. During a company retreat, the behaviour of some colleagues, especially after drinking, revealed a lot."*

Sebastian, male, 26, Warsaw, mixed group:

"I can speak from the experience of my partner, who a few years ago worked at a law firm. She had an incident with a colleague during an after-work social event with friends. He was overly forward and intrusive. HR didn't take any action because it happened outside of working hours, so despite her complaint, the matter was effectively ignored. Ultimately, my partner resigned."

The issue of sexual harassment is addressed with the utmost seriousness and in a nuanced manner. For instance, factors such as power dynamics are considered in the examination of ambiguous zones in the context of workplace flirtation. Participants of all genders acknowledge the possibility of misunderstandings or false accusations, although only a few take up the narrative that such accusations are deliberately used against men or that women provoke such behaviour through their own actions or clothing.

Tomasz, male, 27, Warsaw, all-male group:

"It seems that even a glance can be misinterpreted depending on context. Clothing and demeanour might influence perception; if women presented themselves appropriately, men wouldn't look at them".

In contrast to this, women express concerns that, in cases of harassment, they will not be taken seriously and that they themselves would suffer disadvantages if they made an official complaint.

Matilda, female, 28, Stockholm, all-female group:

"I think women are actually less interested in discussing such things and they may hide it. I don't believe people often dare discussing such issues, so when a women actually speaks up about it, then it's probable that something real has happened. Women are usually not taken seriously when it comes to sexual harassments, according to my experiences."

Perhaps for this very reason, women show clearer solidarity with individuals affected by harassment, like **Aylin (female, 25, Berlin, all-female group)** who states:

"I would rather believe a potential liar than a potential perpetrator".

More generally, violence against women is identified as a problem that is linked to an overall subjective feeling of insecurity. The particular vulnerability of women in public spaces is supported by anecdotal evidence from participants, while violence against women in their close social environment is discussed in more abstract ways, referring to statistics or awareness campaigns.

Liv, female, 25, Stockholm, all-female group:

"There is a reason why those info-ads for the women's helpline are hanging inside the public restrooms, because many women are subjects [sic] to violence and crime, mostly within their own homes".

Some women describe feeling safer in certain situations when accompanied by men or have found that they are less likely to be harassed when accompanied. That said, it's mainly men who stereotype one gender as weak and the other as strong and see this as the reason why women are generally more vulnerable.

Piotr, male, 27, Warsaw, all-male group:

"Poland is generally safe, but it feels safer for men. Most of you likely have female friends, partners or women in your life. There are situations where a woman might feel afraid to take a night bus alone or travel to certain places. I've encountered this multiple times. Being a man, I've never had such apprehensions."

Arman, male, 29, Berlin, all-male group:

"I just think that we as men, you grow up with it, you can defend yourself, you're physically strong, but if you do this thought experiment that you walk down the street and 50% of the people are simply stronger than you, at least, then you walk through the world completely differently. And I think that the safety factor is just one of the things that we as men, sure, it's God-given, but sometimes it's not valued so much that it's a big advantage."

The fight against gender-based violence is perceived as inadequate, with minor achievements seen in the empowerment of those affected.

Carlos, male, 24, Madrid, mixed group:

"I think there are more reports now because the issue has been made visible and a message has been sent out that if this is happening to you, you have to report it. In the past there were cases of abuse that went nowhere because women did not report it and just lived with it. However, now there is more awareness that if you are abused, you have to report it. In addition, telephone numbers and other resources have been set up to help these people."

In addition to this type of awareness-raising work, there are frequent calls for stricter laws and more rigorous prosecution, whereas fundamental components of violence prevention at the institutional level, such as intervention plans or protection concepts, are left out by the participants. In Spain, group discussions across all genders and political affiliations show a strong influence from debates surrounding the "only yes means yes" law. But in other countries, such as Germany, the fight against gender-based violence is also being discussed primarily from a juridical perspective.

Adrian, male, 22, Berlin, all-male group:

"The legal system has failed a bit in the past when it comes to punishing criminals, especially when it comes to sexual abuse or physical assault against women. I think that's primarily because it's a problem that has existed for ages and it is pathetic that it hasn't really been addressed up to today. Violence against women is still not really prevented or is not prevented to the extent that it is no longer a relevant issue."

Participants emphasise that gender-based violence and sexual harassment remain persistent problems. Women, especially in women-only groups, share personal experiences, while young men largely agree such behaviour is unacceptable, though some were hesitant or raised concerns about misuse of claims. Harassment is described as widespread, particularly in workplaces, and participants highlighted gaps in prevention and legal enforcement.

3.5 Between agreement, ambivalence and moderate backlash: Divergent meanings attached to feminism

Broad support for gender equality; cautious engagement with feminism: Most young adults accept gender equality, equal opportunity, dignity and freedom of choice as basic moral standards. Women often identify strongly with feminism, seeing it as both a political framework and a source of personal validation. Men tend to engage more cautiously and sometimes distance themselves from forms they view as extreme or overly politicised.

Agreement on goals, not the label: Participants generally agree on the goals of feminism, including equality, autonomy and participation, though some reject the label because of political, cultural or media associations. In countries such as Poland and Spain, feminism can be seen as foreign, radical or threatening traditional values, even among women who support equality.

Emotional engagement and everyday relevance: Women often reinforce feminist views through personal experiences and information from social media. Men are more likely to treat gender equality as a theoretical or secondary issue. Feminism provides young women with a sense of safety, community and guidance. Some men see it primarily as a women's issue.

Distinguishing mainstream and extreme feminism: Many participants separate mainstream feminism from extreme or radical forms, which are seen as hostile, performative or socially polarising. This allows support for equality while avoiding stigma or conflict, though it can also subtly reinforce anti-feminist ideas.

Limited impact of anti-feminist and manosphere ideas: Some men initially support anti-feminist statements or dating-based grievances, but discussions show these views are often not connected to broader manosphere ideologies. Awareness of online anti-feminist content exists, but it has limited influence on participants' own beliefs, especially in mixed and diverse groups.

Group dynamics influence expression: Critical or anti-feminist views are often softened or abandoned during discussion when challenged by better-informed participants. This suggests that support for such positions can vary, depending on group composition and anonymity.

Building on perceptions of persistent gendered disadvantages in work, care and experiences of harassment, the discussions also touched upon broader frameworks, including feminism and gender equality. While feminism occasionally arose spontaneously, participants were at one point explicitly asked to position themselves in relation to it. Reflections on these concepts reveal how young people navigate both the moral and political dimensions of gender justice. Broad agreement exists on the normative value of equality and freedom of choice, yet responses vary in emotional

engagement, identification and perceived relevance. Women often express strong identification with feminist ideas, seeing them as both a political framework and a source of personal validation, whereas men tend to engage more cautiously, sometimes distancing themselves from forms of feminism perceived as "extreme" or overly politicised.

In Sweden and Germany, participants generally expressed stronger support for gender equality than for feminism. Some Swedish male participants, in particular, viewed feminism as controversial or primarily a political ideology rather than a set of practical values. This perception was less common among German participants; in Spain, particularly men criticised perceived feminist hypocrisy and policy failures, such as the early release of convicted rapists as a result of the removal of the distinction between sexual abuse and sexual aggression by the "only yes means yes" law; in Greece, a clear gender divide emerged, with men in particular stating that feminism is no longer needed; and in Poland, many women support changes that promote gender equality, but they often have a negative reaction to the word "feminism". This is because public debates and media frequently link feminism with.[56]

3.5.1 Minimal agreement on the principles of feminism (not the term itself)

Across all groups, feminism and gender equality are not strongly differentiated in terms of their substantive goals, which are regarded as equality of opportunity, dignity and participation for women. There is a fundamental acceptance of these goals as normative social standards. Most participants have a liberal approach that accepts different lifestyles and emphasises freedom of choice. In this framework, gender equality is seen less as a political struggle and more as a fundamental moral requirement. Open rejection is largely absent, and explicit opposition is rarely articulated.

As Dimitris (male, 27, Athens, mixed group) reflects,

"I fully agree with equality. It's just that equality nowadays has changed a bit and has become all about percentages 50-50, 50% representation, equal representation in everything. That's why I think it's utopian. Because people, precisely because they are equal and have equal rights, are not identical in their preferences and their skills."

Similarly, **Jessica (female, 25, Berlin, mixed group)** emphasises personal freedom and choice:

"I think everyone should just do what they want. There are women who want to be housewives, and they should be able to do that. And if the man brings home the money, that's fine too. And if a woman wants to work, then she wants to work and should do so, and the man can stay at home. Everyone should decide for themselves. "

These reflections illustrate how young people interpret gender equality primarily in terms of individual autonomy and practical flexibility rather than as a strictly political struggle.

Reservations about particular aspects of gender-equality policies or feminist positions are only expressed cautiously and remain weakly defended when challenged by other participants. Where views clash, proponents of feminism, mostly women, but also progressive-leaning men, tend to prevail in the discussion, leveraging detailed knowledge and personal experience. At the same time, they remain receptive to counterarguments rooted in personal perspective, allowing for engagement without dismissiveness. Their well-grounded convictions enable them to respond confidently to criticism, reinforcing supportive interpretations and shaping the group's overall understanding. Controversial debates seldom intensify, as dissenting views are often softened, reformulated or abandoned in response to group dynamics. This tendency could be attributed to the participants' strategic avoidance of conflict, their active persuasion by the other party or the absence of strong feelings regarding the topic.

3.5.2 Divergent identification and emotional engagement with feminism

Despite this general consensus, there is considerable variation among participants in terms of their emotional engagement with feminism and gender equality. Participants supporting feminism tend to exhibit high levels of interest and articulacy, contributing detailed knowledge and factual references.

For example, when debating which lives are easier – men's or women's – a young man, notes that "From all my circle of friends, the sons are generally treated worse than the daughters", indicating less psychological and emotional support for young men and higher expectations placed on them.

Vanessa (female, 24, Berlin, mixed group) responds to him, saying:

"It's really interesting that you say that because I've heard it from other men too, that they feel treated more poorly at school compared to their sisters. At the same time, I also find it really interesting that sons or men still inherit more than women in Germany and that's basically what I get from my family in the end."

In addition to such references to everyday experiences, it became apparent that particularly young women often draw on talking points and information from social media channels dealing with gender inequality.

Jessica, female, 25, Berlin, mixed group:

"We live in the social media era, which gives us much greater access to it. Or to the people affected. Everyone has the opportunity to learn about feminism if they want to".

Furthermore, many women referred to prominent cases that had dominated national news debates for some time. It is not always possible to determine whether participants encountered these stories primarily through social media, traditional media or interpersonal discussions. However, certain slogans or phrases associated with these events were widely recognised and resonated strongly within the discussions. In Greece, for instance, participants repeatedly referred to the phrase "a police car is not a taxi", which became widely circulated after a highly publicised case of femicide.[57] Participants often connected this case to their own experiences and broader concerns about safety and institutional protection.

Katerina (female, 27, Athens, all-female group) linked the public debate directly to her personal encounter with the police:

"The fact that we go out and we are still chased by opportunists is tragic and we call the police. I had a bad incident. I am also one of those women. Okay, everything is fine supposedly. I called the police and they told me 'madam you are exaggerating. Calm down or I will hang up'. […] We sit and discuss the phrase 'the patrol car is not a taxi'. But we don't look behind it. What could have been done to prevent this."

For women identifying as feminists or sympathising with feminism, the term functions not only as a political framework but also as a source of emotional validation and a sense of belonging.

Thaleia, female, 25, Athens, mixed group:

"Just that personally, as a woman, it makes me feel safe to know that this term exists. [Moderator 'The feminist dimension?'] Yes. And to know that there is a side I can turn to if I feel some injustice or feel uncomfortable in some way."

They demonstrate a higher level of awareness of the differences between various feminist movements, emphasise the importance of intersectionality, criticise the commercialisation of feminism and reflect on debates about performative allyship (superficial support for marginalised groups, which lacks meaningful action and often serves the purpose of self-promotion).

Although some men adopt a feminist stance, they perceive themselves to be less affiliated with

feminist movements and exhibit a less pronounced identification with them. Some express personal disinterest or a sense of irrelevance, framing feminism as primarily a women's issue and something they are not directly affected by. For example, **Sebastian (male, 24, Berlin, mixed group)** explains:

"I just don't have any opinions on it [gender equality]. I have other worries. Because I'm not affected by it".

In all-male groups, some express a sense of uncertainty or dissatisfaction with their role and position in feminist discourse. This uncertainty can lead to reluctant participation, cautious wording and selective engagement with feminist debates, often accompanied by a distancing from forms of present-day feminism that are perceived as "extreme".

Alexander, male, 25, Stockholm, all-male group:

"It feels like a troublesome issue to deal with, because it almost feels like I am doing something wrong if I don't hate myself – I am a man, nevertheless!"

Rami, male, 22, Stockholm, all-male group:

"It feels a bit controversial, because the men can actually not say anything in this matters; they should not have an opinion. Whatever a man would say, it would just turn out wrong. I have been in such situations in elementary and high school, where they asked me whether I was a feminist or not – but I didn't know what to answer, because I would be attacked regardless of what I would answer. We all provided the wrong answers! I don't think men should have opinions about women and their rights, but we should of course be helpful."

Statements such as these, suggesting that men cannot or should not engage with feminism, indicate that men are less likely to be addressed by feminist discourse or are even excluded from it. Simultaneously, these statements might also express an intentional distancing from feminism. Particularly in Sweden, some male participants expressed that feminism is primarily a matter for women to "take care of" or "organise" on their own, reflecting a perception that gender equality is a women's issue rather than a shared societal responsibility. A comparable trend emerges in other countries, as male participants exhibit reduced levels of both familiarity with and interest in feminist subjects within the focus groups. Both variations suggest limited solidarity with feminist goals, a distancing from feminist activism and the assumption that men's engagement is secondary or unnecessary, even in discussions about structural inequalities or political advocacy. It highlights how some young men frame feminism as a domain reserved for women, rather than a collective effort in which all genders have a role to play.

3.5.3 Navigating "extreme feminism": Ambivalence, distancing and subtle anti-feminist discourses

Anti-feminist talking points that equate feminism with a hatred of men or exaggeration are recognised but not fully endorsed; instead, they are regarded as a distorted manifestation of modern feminism that has deviated from its original core. Participants frequently make a distinction between feminism as a movement pursuing gender equality and "extreme feminism", which is characterised as hostile to men or excessive.

Those identifying as feminists appear to feel the need to differentiate themselves from this "extreme feminism" to be perceived as credible and legitimate. This distinction enables participants to affirm their support for gender equality while simultaneously rejecting controversial or stigmatised interpretations. By doing so, they assert support for gender equality while distancing themselves from interpretations that could be socially stigmatised or politically polarising.

For instance, **Victoria (female, 20, Madrid, all-female group)** explains:

"There are extreme feminists – or rather, female supremacists – 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."

Here, Victoria frames the distinction as a strategy to communicate feminism in a relatable and non-threatening way, highlighting the contrast between radicalised stereotypes and everyday feminist goals.

Concurrently, the accentuation on distancing from "extreme feminism" can function as a subtle form of anti-feminism. By emphasising extreme or exaggerated facets, participants imply a questioning of the legitimacy and relevance of feminism in the present times, without openly opposing its fundamental principles and potentially facing criticism for doing so. Male participants often articulate this ambivalence through personal observations and experiences.

Theodoros, male, 28, Athens, all-male group:

"I'm obviously not against feminism. But the feminist girls I've encountered […] are extreme and over the top. I think they do more harm to what they're trying to achieve, because of this need to be more intense, more fanatical about the message they want to get across and in the end they end up looking like a caricature: very accusatory, very prejudiced. I think they've lost the meaning of what feminism is."

Stefanos, male, 23, Athens, all-male group:

"It's good that feminism exists – but it should have boundaries. When those boundaries are crossed and it violates someone's democratic rights or personal boundaries, that's fascism".

Elias, male, 21, Stockholm, mixed group:

"It feels like feminism was trendy like ten years ago. It was frequently mentioned in [the] media and also this about extreme feminism popped up. In Sweden today, where everything is rather fine and nice, I don't see any reasons why one would want to be associated with feminism."

The repeated mention of not being "against feminism" is clearly undermined by the participants' statements: by defining feminism primarily in terms of its supposedly "extreme"" manifestations, they question its legitimacy as a whole without openly taking a stand against it. This becomes particularly clear in the equating of feminism with fascism, a rhetorical exaggeration that is unmistakably anti-feminist. Also, the belief that being associated with feminism is outdated and negative nowadays reveals a form of modern sexism, as it denies existing inequalities and undermines the legitimacy of feminist activism.

When prompted to discuss statements from the "manosphere", a loose, anti-feminist network with ties to the far right that targets young men online and promotes self-optimisation and hegemonic masculinity, such as "most women are only interested in dating a specific type of man, which leaves the majority of men at a disadvantage", some men and a few women initially express support for the statement. However, it quickly became clear that this support was not grounded in the underlying values or norms of the manosphere itself.

This worldview was particularly familiar to participants who are more engaged with feminist content. They are able to identify the statement and link it to key figures associated with the manosphere, such as Andrew Tate. These participants view it as a cause for concern, noting that such narratives could contribute to the spread of anti-feminist and misogynistic attitudes, especially among younger demographics.

As **Nina (female, 23, Berlin, mixed group)** explains:

"It somehow made me think about these incels. I think that's what they're called. There are forums on the Internet where men who can't get a woman eventually develop a hatred of women because they strongly support this statement".

Also, in just one group, in Spain, participants note in an unprompted way that younger males, particularly teenagers, are increasingly exposed to anti-feminist content on social media and influenced by far-right

discourse, though they report that they themselves do not feel personally affected by these trends.

While most participants perceive dating preferences as individual choices influenced by social norms rather than rigid rules, a few men express feelings of being left behind or disadvantaged in romantic contexts.

Tomek (male, 29, Warsaw, all-male group) illustrates this perspective:

"To be blunt, most women today tend to think in a Machiavellian way. They effectively scan potential partners, evaluating who might be suitable for them, and in the process, certain mental 'filters' emerge. For instance, if a man is under 170 centimetres, he is immediately dismissed as unattractive. That's the first criterion. Even if he has other positive qualities, like wealth, one negative trait can nullify the rest, much like discarding a card in UNO. Subsequent 'cards' are then evaluated in turn."

Overall, the fact that many participants do not recognise or engage with manosphere content during the discussions suggests that the reach and resonance of such material remains limited. At the same time, the prompted statement indicates that there is potential for these ideas to find support among certain groups, particularly young men.

It is important to keep in mind that the composition of the focus groups is mixed and diverse, including in terms of party preferences. The groups are deliberately not homogeneous with regard to negative attitudes toward gender equality or feminism. In this setting, participants who question or challenge even some fundamental aspects of gender equality often face pushback or backlash from others who are well-informed and equipped with solid arguments, after which most tend to soften or abandon their positions. In a more homogeneous group, or in a more anonymous setting – such as an online discussion – these critical or anti-feminist stances might have been voiced differently. The implications of these contextual factors, including group composition and interaction format, are examined more thoroughly in the reflection section.

3.5.4 Reflections on the approach and findings

One of the key strengths of this study lies in its comparative and multi-country design. Conducted across five countries, the focus groups provide nuanced insights into how societal norms, cultural contexts and local values shape perceptions of gender equality and feminism. The inclusion of three to five groups per country, with varied gender compositions, allowed for the rich observation of both shared and contested viewpoints, revealing the diversity and polarisation inherent in these topics.

The groups were deliberately heterogeneous in terms of party preferences, generating a wide range of opinions on gender equality and feminism. Participants who strongly endorsed these principles – sometimes including feminist ideas – tended to be well-prepared, articulate and equipped with factual references. In Poland, participants aligned with parties such as PiS and Confederation similarly drew on structured talking points, representing the opposing perspective. Views critical of gender equality or feminism often faced pushback, reflecting how group composition shaped debate. While this heterogeneity enriched discussions, future research could examine ideologically aligned groups to explore dynamics within more politically homogeneous settings.

Societal norms and social desirability influenced what participants felt comfortable expressing. Supporters of gender equality and feminism were generally able to assert their views, while critical or anti-feminist stances were often moderated or softened due to peer feedback. In more anonymous or online settings, or within safer spaces such as an established group of friends, these views might be expressed more openly. Future studies could also investigate such settings to capture private opinions and systematically assess the influence of social media.

Another consideration concerns the impact of social media on political and gender-related views. The focus groups indicated that social media frequently served as a source of knowledge, facts and talking

points for young people, particularly young women. However, its direct influence on the discussions was generally limited, with the notable exception of one group in Spain, where participants explicitly linked young men's far-right voting tendencies to exposure on social media.

Carlos, male, 24, Madrid, mixed group:

"I believe that there are 16 year olds who are very influenced by far-right rhetoric, mainly due to social media. Furthermore, the far right is also targeting that audience".

The fact that, apart from the discussion in Spain, there is little explicit evidence of social media influence does not imply that it has no strong impact; rather, it suggests that its effects were not directly visible in the conversations. The prompted discussion around statements from the "manosphere" illustrates this: while some participants recognised the content and its ideological origins, many did not explicitly identify it as coming from far-right or anti-feminist sources. This lack of explicit recognition could reflect at least three dynamics: (1) the content does not resonate strongly with participants in a way that they identify with or feel compelled to voice; (2) participants notice it but choose not to disclose their engagement with it in the focus group setting; or (3) participants perceive such statements as a legitimate or normalised stance within public discourse, which points to the broader normalisation of far-right content in debates around gender and feminism. The study, therefore, provides limited insights into the role of social media in shaping perceptions, highlighting an area for further investigation.

The choice to conduct the study in the capitals of each country was deliberate, reflecting their significance as political, economic and cultural hubs where attitudes and lived realities often converge but also diverge sharply from rural areas. Capitals tend to have greater access to education, employment opportunities and diverse social networks, which can shape perceptions of gender equality differently than in smaller towns or rural regions. The discussions themselves highlighted this spatial dimension. For instance, a young man in Warsaw who voted for PiS criticised that "unfortunately" in Warsaw – described as more liberal compared to the rest of Poland – two men can openly walk hand in hand, framing this visibility as emblematic of the capital's distinct cultural climate. Similarly, participants in Berlin emphasised that less traditional family models and life paths beyond heteronormative norms are part of lived reality in Berlin, while suggesting that attitudes and practices might differ substantially in other parts of Germany. These findings therefore primarily reflect suburban and urban-capital perspectives and may not fully capture attitudes prevalent in rural or more isolated regions.

While discussions occasionally referenced non-binary individuals, most participants continued to think and speak in binary terms. Even when explicitly prompted to consider whose life is easier – men, women or non-binary persons – the conversation largely reverted to comparisons between men and women, with non-binary perspectives quickly fading from the discussion. These conversations also tend to attribute fundamental differences between men and women, often described as natural or culturally developed. This highlights the persistence of binary frameworks in shaping perceptions of gender equality, despite growing societal awareness of gender diversity.

Although participants occasionally mentioned factors such as social class, ethnicity or generational differences, these dimensions were not systematically explored. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect general perceptions of gender rather than how gender interacts with other forms of inequality. In particular, in Sweden and Germany, several participants with a migration background contributed nuanced perspectives: on one hand, they expressed understanding for progressive stances on gender equality, but they also highlighted that in their cultural settings, gender roles are experienced and understood differently. At the same time, especially young women with migration backgrounds emphasised the intersection between gender and ethnicity.

As **Maryam (female, 25, Berlin, all-female group)** explains:

"I also have a migration background and therefore, well, it starts with the name and when people find out at some point, I'm also from Lebanon, for example, or I'm not purely German in general. I'll say that I also tend to look more critically, probably a little less than you did because of the headscarf but it's always there, regardless of whether it's choosing a career, school, university, if you don't have the right people in front of you, then you have to fight through it."

A more targeted exploration of intersectional factors could provide a richer understanding of structural barriers and variations in experiences of gendered inequality.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of considering context, group composition, spatial positioning and social norms when interpreting young people's attitudes toward gender equality and feminism. It provides valuable comparative insights while acknowledging the methodological constraints that shape the contours of observable discussion and debate.

3.5.5 Summary

3.5.5.1 Crisis as a generational condition

Across all five countries, the focus groups show that young people's attitudes toward gender equality and feminism are embedded in a broader experience of crisis and societal instability. Economic insecurity, political polarisation, geopolitical tensions, housing shortages and climate anxiety form the backdrop against which questions of justice, representation and gender roles are interpreted. Particularly in Greece, participants described a pronounced sense of structural blockage and limited prospects, often expressing little hope that national conditions would substantially improve.

At the same time, a consistent pattern emerges across countries and genders, while pessimism about the future of the country is widespread, many participants remain comparatively optimistic about their personal futures. They express confidence in their education, adaptability and individual resilience, despite distrusting institutions and doubting collective trajectories. This asymmetry between collective pessimism and personal optimism is politically significant. It creates space for narratives emphasising national decline and loss of control without undermining belief in individual advancement. Crisis thus functions both as lived experience and as an interpretive framework shaping political perceptions.

Crisis perceptions are also gendered in their articulation. Young men tend to frame crises in macro-political, economic and abstract terms, referring to labour markets, geopolitical instability or institutional dysfunction. Young women, while equally aware of structural challenges, more frequently translate crisis into embodied and relational concerns, including safety in public spaces, reproductive autonomy, mental health pressures and vulnerability to harassment. Their accounts emphasise the direct social and personal consequences of instability, often extending beyond questions of professional advancement. It is precisely at this point, where crisis is translated into everyday lived vulnerability, that the discussion also becomes personal for men. When debates move from abstract systemic concerns to issues such as social expectations, relationships, status pressures or shifting gender norms, male participants likewise articulate experiences of uncertainty and pressure. The embodied dimension of crisis thus opens a space in which both women and men connect structural instability to their own biographies, albeit in different ways.

3.5.5.2 Political frustration and gendered leadership perceptions

A second cross-cutting finding is widespread political frustration. Across ideological backgrounds, participants criticise political elites for ineffectiveness, polarisation and symbolic conflict. Trust in institutions is limited, and political

legitimacy is frequently assessed in performance-oriented terms. Politicians are judged less by ideological coherence than by their perceived ability to deliver results and manage crises effectively.

Within this shared dissatisfaction, gendered patterns of political identification become visible. Some young women emphasise the importance of female political leaders, particularly from the left, highlighting both the symbolic and substantive value of representation. Female role models are seen not only as representatives of women's interests but also as evidence that political authority need not remain male-dominated.

When confronted with the statement that male politicians are better equipped to handle contemporary crises, women largely reject the claim. Many male participants adopt more ambivalent positions, and some express agreement, suggesting that men may be perceived, implicitly or explicitly, as more decisive or crisis-ready. Even when not framed as explicit superiority claims, such responses reveal persistent cultural associations between masculinity and leadership under pressure. Crisis contexts appear to reinforce these associations by linking effective governance with traditionally masculine-coded traits such as strength and decisiveness.

3.5.5.3 Liberal interpretive frames dominate: Structural problems and individual solutions

Across countries, discussions about gender equality are characterised by strong neoliberal interpretive frames. Participants clearly recognise structural inequalities, including gender pay gaps, career penalties linked to motherhood, unequal care burdens and women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. However, when discussing solutions, the focus frequently shifts from structural reform to individual choice and responsibility. For many women, this is not necessarily because they endorse neoliberal ideology. Rather, it reflects a form of pragmatic liberalism: they acknowledge past successes in gender equality and, to some extent, feminism, but have limited confidence in structural change or in the ability of political parties and the state to deliver meaningful progress.

Care arrangements are described primarily as matters for couples to negotiate privately. Labour market outcomes are linked to qualifications, personal efforts and decisions. Equality is commonly defined as equal opportunity rather than equal outcomes. Policies such as parental leave schemes are acknowledged as helpful but seen as insufficient if income disparities persist. Participants often argue that if men earn more, it is economically rational for women to assume a larger share of care responsibilities, even in relationships committed to egalitarian ideals. Market logic thus reinforces gendered divisions of labour without explicit ideological justification.

Similarly, gender quotas are frequently criticised, particularly by male participants, as producing "quota women" and undermining meritocratic principles. While women tend to be more open to such measures, scepticism remains present across groups. Structural inequalities are acknowledged, yet structural interventions are treated cautiously, especially when perceived as intrusive or distorting competition. State intervention receives strongest support in areas such as combating gender-based violence, where protection and enforcement are viewed as legitimate public responsibilities. Policies aimed at reshaping norms or redistributing power encounter greater resistance.

3.5.5.4 Crisis, security and the appeal of traditional family models

The interaction between crisis experiences and gender norms is particularly salient. In contexts marked by economic insecurity and social uncertainty, traditional family models can regain appeal, not necessarily due to ideological conservatism, but because they promise stability, clarity and security. The single breadwinner model is sometimes seen as pragmatically reasonable in uncertain times. However, given current economic conditions, most young people do not view a single-earner household as a realistic option.

Economic rationality, where the higher earner prioritises paid work, often legitimises gendered divisions of labour without explicit normative endorsement. Crisis conditions thus indirectly stabilise traditional arrangements by presenting them as efficient and protective. Experiences of instability translate into preferences for role models associated with provision, reliability and decisiveness; traits historically coded as masculine. Lived insecurity therefore shapes both family imaginaries and leadership expectations.

3.5.5.5 Media usage, information sources and the mixed role of social media in shaping perceptions of gender equality

Exposure to social media content is rarely mentioned by participants as a reason for the gender divide among young people in an unprompted way. Only in one group in Spain (mixed gender) did a young male participant explain differing attitudes towards gender equality as a result of exposure to far-right content. While social media usage is not always at the centre of participants' reflections, it nevertheless plays a subtle but important role in how they form opinions, access information and articulate their views.

Social media serves as an important source of information, arguments and awareness, especially for young women, who often draw on feminist content, public debates and widely circulated cases to support their positions. It facilitates access to perspectives and experiences that might otherwise remain less visible, thereby contributing to higher levels of articulation and engagement in discussions about gender and inequality. At the same time, the origin of information used in participants' arguments is often unclear. During the discussions, participants at times explicitly stated that they were not certain whether the information they referred to came from traditional news media, social media or personal conversations with friends. This reflects a broader blurring of information sources in which knowledge is drawn from multiple channels without a clear distinction between them. As a result, while participants actively use and reproduce information in their arguments, they do not always consciously attribute it to a specific source, suggesting that its influence is diffuse and often taken for granted rather than explicitly acknowledged.

Additionally, social media is frequently perceived as a space where polarisation occurs, partly driven by political parties and politicians themselves. In light of this polarisation, as well as broader global and domestic challenges, many participants report a growing distance from daily news consumption and social media use as a means of informing themselves about political issues. This tendency reflects a certain level of fatigue or disengagement, as participants navigate an increasingly complex and often negative information environment. This concern is voiced across all genders, but young women tend to reflect more explicitly on the personal impact of these dynamics. This aligns with a broader pattern in which men tend to discuss the effects of crises and political developments in more abstract terms, whereas women more often relate these issues to personal experiences and lived realities.

3.5.5.6 Broad support for gender equality: Diverging salience

Despite ambivalence toward specific policy tools, normative support for gender equality remains broad across all countries, though with varying intensity. Young people overwhelmingly endorse the principle that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. However, there is a clear gender gap in salience. For many women, gender equality is a central political concern, closely tied to personal experiences of discrimination, harassment or constrained life planning. For many men, it is one important issue among others, often secondary to economic or geopolitical concerns.

This difference in prioritisation does not amount to rejection. Even participants expressing anti-feminist sentiments typically affirm equality as a general goal. Resistance is more often directed at specific framings or perceived excesses. A recurring distinction is made between the fundamental goals of feminism, understood as equal rights and

opportunities, and what participants describe as "too extreme" forms that allegedly become hostile toward men.

The Polish case illustrates how politicisation of the term "feminism" does not necessarily translate into rejection of its substantive claims. Although feminism has been publicly stigmatised in national discourse, young women articulate strong critiques of patriarchal structures and express support for policies aimed at improving women's rights. The label itself may be contested, but the underlying grievances resonate.

3.5.5.7 Feminism: Diffuse support and political ambivalence

A recurring discursive strategy across groups is the differentiation between feminism as equality of opportunity and what participants describe as "extreme feminism." The former is widely accepted as legitimate and necessary, while the latter is portrayed as exaggerated, divisive or anti-male. This distinction allows male participants in particular to express support for equality while distancing themselves from perceived radicalism. It serves as a socially acceptable way to articulate discomfort without openly rejecting gender justice.

Women, by contrast, often describe feminism not only as a political position but also as a source of solidarity, a protective framework and a language for articulating injustice. Feminism provides interpretive tools that connect personal experiences to broader structural patterns. It thus fulfils both political and emotional functions by validating lived experiences and enabling collective identification.

Explicitly anti-feminist positions were relatively rare and often moderated within the group setting. However, the partial resonance of grievance-based narratives, such as claims of male disadvantage in dating or public discourse, suggests that crisis-driven insecurity can create openings for gendered resentment frames. While these perspectives remain marginal within the sample, their presence indicates that ambivalence should not be equated with stability. Under conditions of heightened insecurity, such narratives could gain traction.

3.5.5.8 Basic normative consensus under conditions of insecurity

Overall, the findings portray a generation characterised by crisis awareness, institutional scepticism and liberal individualism, yet also by a strong normative commitment to gender equality. Gender differences manifest less in outright opposition than in salience, emotional engagement, and interpretations of leadership and responsibility.

Rather than a polarised divide between supporters and opponents of equality, the dominant pattern is one of broad, though sometimes diffuse, support for gender equality accompanied by contestation over means, framing and the scope of structural change. This ambivalence represents both a vulnerability, as insecurity can increase the appeal of hierarchical or traditional models, and an opportunity, as foundational support for gender justice remains widely shared across countries and political backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

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This study examines whether a new political gender divide is emerging among Gen Z. Historically, Western democracies experienced a "gender realignment", with women shifting from more conservative positions in the mid-20th century to more left-leaning political attitudes by the 1990s. Recent research raises the question of whether younger men and women are now further diverging in their political views and engagement.

The existing evidence is mixed. While some studies point to growing gender differences in ideological left-right self-placement, attitudes toward gender equality and political preferences, these patterns vary across countries and variables analysed. Explanations suggested by the existing literature include the gendered effects of economic and social change leading to societal liberalisation, differences in education and labour market outcomes, and the influence of online environments and political narratives. Against this backdrop, this study assesses the extent and nature of Gen Z gender divides across Europe and five selected countries.

Patterns in political attitudes and behaviour

The quantitative analysis confirms previous research and shows that gender differences among young people are most clearly visible in ideological self-placement and attitudes toward gender equality, while differences in voting behaviour remain comparatively limited. Across Europe, the ideological gender gap has widened in recent years and is now most pronounced among those aged 15-29. This development is driven primarily by young women positioning themselves further to the left than older cohorts, whereas young men tend to hold similar positions to older men, with some country-specific exceptions where younger men appear somewhat more right-leaning.

A similarly consistent pattern emerges in attitudes toward gender equality. Across Europe, young women express more progressive views than young men on issues such as workplace discrimination, equal pay and sexual harassment. This gap is again strongest among the youngest age group. However, cross-national variation remains important. Sweden stands out as the case with the most pronounced and consistent youth gender divide, while Germany shows little evidence of such a pattern. Greece, Poland and Spain display more mixed results. Crucially, the analysis suggests that these divides do not stem from a single dynamic: in some cases, they reflect increasing progressivism among young women, while in others they are driven by comparatively more conservative attitudes among young men.

Perspectives and lived experiences of Gen Z

Considering the limitations of survey data in capturing the complexity of gender gaps, we conducted focus group research with young people aged 18-29 in Germany, Greece, Spain, Sweden and Poland. The findings suggest that the emerging gender divide cannot be reduced to a simple conflict over gender politics or feminism. Rather, it reflects a broader generational experience shaped by economic insecurity, social change and declining trust in political institutions.

Across all countries, young people, regardless of gender, describe growing up in a context defined by overlapping crises, including economic instability, housing shortages, geopolitical tensions, climate change and political polarisation. These experiences shape how they assess both their personal futures

and the trajectory of their societies. While many express pessimism about the future of their countries, they often remain comparatively optimistic about their own ability to adapt. This combination of collective pessimism and individual optimism highlights a belief in personal resilience alongside doubts about the capacity of political and economic systems to deliver stability and opportunity. Economic insecurity and housing affordability emerge as particularly central concerns, influencing key life decisions related to independence, mobility and family formation.

Dissatisfaction with political actors is widespread, with many young people criticising politicians for performative conflict and a lack of tangible results. Yet this frustration does not translate into a rejection of democracy. Instead, young people adopt a performance-oriented view of politics, judging legitimacy by effectiveness and problem-solving capacity. This points to a core challenge for European democracies: not a crisis of values, but of institutional credibility. Across countries, young adults prioritise results over ideology, evaluating political actors based on their ability to address economic insecurity, social inequality, polarisation and security. This sentiment was captured through the vivid metaphor of politicians "telling fairytales". This does not mean ideology no longer matters, but respondents were divided. For some, views on welfare, migration, climate and gender equality were shaped by party-political lines; for many others, party labels carried little real meaning. Yet political participation remains valued, with voting and civic engagement still widely seen as important responsibilities. Cross-national differences are mainly a matter of tone. Distrust in politics is particularly pronounced in Greece and Poland, often linked to political polarisation and perceived socio-economic structural barriers, while in Spain criticism focuses on the negatively perceived prevalence of political spectacle (instead of results oriented, "serious" politics). In Germany and Sweden, scepticism toward political actors coexists more clearly with continued trust in institutions and a strong sense of civic responsibility.

Within the broader context of generational insecurity and political frustration, gender differences among young people become visible, though they should not be overstated. Young men and women largely agree on core concerns such as economic pressures, declining opportunities and dissatisfaction with political leadership, yet they often interpret these challenges in different ways. Young women tend to understand instability through experiences of vulnerability, safety and social protection, emphasising issues like workplace discrimination, harassment, unequal care responsibilities and reproductive autonomy. As a result, gender equality remains a highly salient political concern that directly shapes their everyday lives. Young men, by contrast, are more likely to interpret similar structural pressures through the lens of opportunity, recognition, fairness, social status, and the perceived erosion of predictable and meritocratic routes to success through education and work. While many express support for gender equality in principle, they often see it as less pressing than broader economic challenges. In this context, policies aimed at addressing structural inequalities, such as gender quotas, can be perceived by some as redistributing opportunities at their expense within an already competitive environment. Here, for some, a kind of zero-sum mentality between genders emerges, shaped by precarity. This was particularly prevalent in Greece. In times of economic and social uncertainty, more traditional family roles may also gain appeal for some young people, particularly when associated with stability, financial security and protection.

Debates around gender equality and feminism often appear more polarised in media reporting than they actually are, reflecting differences in interpretation rather than fundamental disagreement. Across countries, young people broadly support gender equality as a core democratic principle and recognise that inequalities persist in areas such as work, caregiving and safety. While many young women identify with feminism as both a political framework and a source of personal validation, many young men, though supportive of equality, engage more

cautiously and distance themselves from the label, often viewing it as politicised. Importantly, there is widespread agreement on the goals associated with feminism, including equality and autonomy, even among those who reject the term itself due to cultural or political associations. In some contexts, such as Poland and Spain, feminism may be perceived as foreign or radical, contributing to less enthusiastic use of the term, especially among men, but also among a sizable number of women. Overall, the divide seems to stem less from differences in core values than from divergent interpretations of feminism and its aims, fostering a sense of polarisation despite significant common ground.

These interpretive differences may be further shaped by how young people navigate today's social media environment. While social media is rarely identified by participants as a direct driver of gender divides among young people, it exerts a significant indirect influence on how opinions are shaped and articulated. It serves as an important source of information, particularly for young women, who often draw on feminist content and public debates, while also contributing to a blurred information landscape in which the origins of knowledge are difficult to trace. Participants frequently mobilise and reproduce information without clearly distinguishing whether it stems from social media, traditional news or interpersonal exchanges, suggesting a diffuse and largely unacknowledged influence. At the same time, social media is widely perceived as a space for political polarisation, leading some participants to distance themselves from news and online content due to fatigue and disengagement. Although these concerns are expressed across genders, young women are more likely to reflect on their personal implications, whereas young men tend to frame these dynamics in more abstract terms and more often express a form of "critical confidence" – the belief that they can identify manipulation and remain unaffected by bias. Yet this confidence can coexist with participation in polarised online spaces, where gender equality is sometimes framed as a zero-sum conflict or there is an explicit gender backlash.

However, despite these dynamics, it is also important to note that there is little evidence that strongly anti-feminist or "manosphere" narratives dominate young men's views. While some participants report encountering such content, its direct influence appears limited. Critical or sceptical attitudes toward feminism often soften under peer discussion, suggesting these views are not deeply entrenched but instead reflect provisional interpretations shaped by context and media exposure. Finally, the mixed political composition of the focus groups may have moderated more extreme views. More ideologically homogeneous groups could produce different findings – an avenue for future research.

Implications for policy and progressive politics

Taken together, the findings suggest that the emerging gender divide within Gen Z should not be understood as a cultural confrontation between men and women. Rather, it reflects shared structural pressures that are interpreted through different social experiences and expectations. Economic insecurity, declining trust in institutions and uncertainty about future life chances form the common foundation of these attitudes. For progressive policymakers, these findings highlight the need for a structured and comprehensive approach that moves beyond cultural debates about feminism or identity politics. Rather than framing gender issues as a zero-sum conflict or focusing primarily on the experiences of either young men or young women, policy and communication should address the underlying conditions of generational insecurity that shape both groups' lives, while acknowledging the different ways these experiences are interpreted. Crucially, when asked about their main societal concerns, young people tend to frame them in terms of personal independence, life planning and long-term stability. Effective policy and communication should therefore clearly demonstrate how they can improve everyday life along these dimensions. In short, the priority is to make policy personally relevant, grounded in shared material concerns and remaining responsive to how different groups make sense of them. Therefore, we suggest the following policy recommendations:

1. **Rebuilding material foundations and economic security**

   Structural and economic policies are central to addressing these challenges. Rebuilding the material foundations of the social contract through more stable early-career opportunities and more effective political problem-solving is essential for improving young people's life chances.

   In this context, labour market reforms should ensure that educational achievement translates into fair outcomes. This includes stronger enforcement of equal pay legislation; greater salary transparency; and family-friendly workplace policies such as paid parental leave, affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements.

2. **Strengthening social protection during the transition to adulthood**

   Social protection policies play a key role in easing the transition to adulthood. Strengthening the broader safety net through targeted youth employment initiatives, improved access to affordable housing and reliable access to reproductive healthcare can reduce the economic insecurity underlying many social and psychological challenges.

3. **Expanding mental health support**

   Mental health and wellbeing policies are equally important. Expanding accessible mental health services for young adults can address rising psychological strain, with particular attention being paid to reducing stigma around help-seeking among men while responding to high levels of anxiety reported by young women.

4. **Promoting inclusive gender norms**

   Social and cultural policies should aim to reshape gender norms in more inclusive ways. Educational initiatives that promote emotional literacy, encourage shared caregiving responsibilities, and present more diverse models of masculinity and femininity can help young men find purpose beyond traditional roles while easing identity pressures on young women.

   Over time, such efforts may also help challenge persistent stereotypes identified in the focus groups, including preferences for male over female leadership and the perception among some young men that gender equality or feminism primarily serves women.

5. **Addressing polarisation through effective governance**

   Many participants viewed current polarisation as unproductive, either as political conflict turned into theatre or as zero-sum rhetoric in which support for one group facing insecurity is framed as coming at another's expense.

   This does not mean avoiding conflict or failing to draw clear lines when progressive values, policy or democracy itself are under threat. Rather, polarisation is criticised because it is seen as displacing effective governance. Reducing it therefore depends on demonstrating political effectiveness and addressing the material insecurities that make divisive narratives more salient.

6. **Bridging structural and individual framings**

   Many participants recognised gender inequality as a structural issue, yet often framed solutions in individual and liberal terms, emphasising self-reliance and personal agency. This may reflect limited trust in political institutions, but also a broader individualistic outlook.

Progressive responses should therefore combine structural reforms with narratives that also resonate at the level of individual experience. This means pairing collective solutions with a language of personal freedom, agency and contribution. Framing

structural change in terms of what it enables people to do in their own lives can make it more tangible and persuasive, while also helping to counter narratives of decline and loss of control. This does not mean that a more collective narrative of shared responsibilities and achievements should be abandoned. Rather, these elements can be shaped into a coherent whole.

Taken together, these policy directions suggest that improving the lives of younger generations requires addressing insecurity and precarity at their roots while building broad-based support that includes rather than divides. Importantly, support for gender equality remains widespread across countries and political backgrounds, leaving clear space for progressive politics to advance equality in ways that resonate with everyday concerns and lived experience.

ANNEX

Additional information on data and methods

The source of the data is the ESS, a semi-annual, cross-country survey administered in almost all European countries from 2002 to 2024. Respondents are asked a host of questions, including political and social attitudes, confidence in institutions, and a battery of demographic background questions. The analysis relies on two ESS sources:

1. a survey battery with the same questions going back to 2002 to elucidate trends over time, whereby we draw on several variables from the "politics" theme of the ESS time series; and

2. as the 2024 ESS survey wave contains a battery of questions specifically on gender attitudes, such as workplace gender equality, perceptions of equal treatment of men and women by state institutions, and preferences of gender equality across society, we draw on the 2024 cross section of survey data for a more in-depth analysis of recent years.

Our sample relies on all available respondents from all 27 EU countries plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the UK. In the 2024 survey wave, a total of 41,242 respondents were available from 24 countries. For the over-time data, we have a sample of over 460,000 respondents, bi-annually from 2002 to 2023, from all 27 EU countries plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the UK. In addition to the full European sample models, we report individual country models for the five selected case study countries within the EQUALIZE project: Germany; Greece; Poland; Spain; and Sweden.

Our main explanatory variables are respondent age and gender. In the case of age, we rely on a four-category ordered variable, whereby we are most interested in highlighting the results for the 'younger' cohort – that is, Gen Z, which we code as 15-29 years old. These are compared with the age groups of 30-49, 50-64 and 65+ year olds. For respondent gender, we use a binary coding for men and women. In addition, we include a control variable for the respondent's mother's level of education (tertiary or higher = "1", and "0" if otherwise), which is an exogenous variable often used as a proxy for SES. In all cross-country models, we account for country fixed effects and for those modelled over time. We include survey-year dummy variables to account for unobserved factors that contribute to overall trends in our variables of interest. Finally, we follow the advice of the ESS survey investigators and include analysis weights, which adjust for discrepancies between the sample and population (age, gender, education and region) to render the sample more of a reflection of the actual population.

Our outcome variables of interest are derived from the literature review chapter. Firstly, we capture left-right ideology via a respondent's self-placement on the left-right scale, whereby "0" is far left and "10" is far right. The question reads as follows: *In politics, people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?*

Secondly, we look at the degree to which other relevant political attitudes diverge by gender and age, such as attitudes on immigration, same-sex marriage, redistribution and satisfaction with democracy.

Thirdly, we look at the following indicators of gender-equality attitudes from the ESS 2024 survey:

- *agreement: women are treated unfairly in hiring/pay/promotions ("0" = no, "1" = yes);*

- *good or bad for [country's] economy if women and men are paid equally (1-7 scale, 1 = "very bad" to 7 = "very good"); and*

- *how often women exaggerate sexual harassment claims (1-5 scale, never to always)*

Finally, we analyse the youth gender gap in voting patterns for four party families in the five selected case-study countries:

- social democrats (voters of parties affiliated with S&D in the European Parliament);

- centre-right (affiliated with EPP in the European Parliament);

- left/greens (affiliated with Greens/EFA or the Left in the European Parliament); and

- far right (affiliated with the PfE, ECR or ESN groups in the European Parliament).

We identify our models via the following model for the 2024 analysis:

$$Y_i=\alpha_i+\beta_1(Age_i)+\beta_2(Sexi)+\beta_3(Age_iSex_i)x_i+\beta_4(SES_i)+\theta_i+e_i$$

where Y_i is the outcome of interest and is explained by the interaction of a respondent's age and gender (β_3) under control for SES and country fixed effects (θi). 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, we use ordinary squares, linear regression (OLS) for all models, save for those that are binary (0/1), whereby we estimate the models via Probit estimation.

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57 The phrase refers to the killing of a 28-year-old woman outside a police station in Athens. The victim had gone to the station seeking protection from her former partner and was on the phone with a police operator, asking for a patrol car to escort her home because she feared for her safety. The officer reportedly replied that "a police car is not a taxi". Moments later, while still on the phone, her ex-partner attacked her from behind and fatally stabbed her only meters from the police station. The case sparked widespread public outrage, raised questions about the police response to gender-based violence, and triggered political debate and internal investigations within the police force.

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A new political gender divide is often said to be defining Gen Z in Europe: young women moving left; young men moving right. But is this really the case?

Drawing on European Social Survey data across the EU and beyond, as well as focus groups with young people in Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden, this policy study offers a more nuanced answer. It shows that gender differences among young Europeans are real but uneven across countries and issues. The clearest gaps appear in ideological self-placement and attitudes towards gender equality, while differences in voting behaviour are less pronounced than public debate often suggests.

Rather than a simple cultural clash between young women and men, the study reveals a generation shaped by shared insecurity: rising living costs; housing pressures; unstable labour markets; climate anxiety; and weakening trust in political institutions. It argues that the emerging divide is best understood not as a deep ideological rupture, but as a reflection of precarity, uncertainty and contested interpretations of gender equality, as well as the different importance young women and men attach to it, despite the principle itself remaining broadly shared.

By linking gender equality to economic security, social protection, mental wellbeing, inclusive social norms and effective governance, this policy study sets out forward-looking recommendations for rebuilding trust, opportunity and democratic resilience across generations.

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