



PRECARITY AND GENDER EQUALITY AMONG GREEK YOUTH

ABSTRACT

What happens to gender equality when a generation feels it is fighting over shrinking opportunities? This policy brief examines how young adults in Athens understand equality.

Drawing on three focus groups with 18–29-year-olds, it shows that participants support equal rights, yet often discuss gendered harm as a competition. I describe this pattern as “zero-sum equality talk”. It is most visible in discussions of jobs and public debate, especially where institutions seem inconsistent and media coverage selective. Around consent and bodily autonomy, however, participants use a firmer language of rights, leaving less room for competitive comparisons.

The findings suggest that support for gender equality is shaped by the material conditions of everyday life. Policies will carry greater weight when linked to fighting inequality and promoting affordability. Durable policy and discussion grounded in young people’s experiences can make equality feel like a shared source of security in lives marked by uncertainty.

This study forms part of FEPS’s Equalize project on youth, gender equality and political attitudes across Europe.¹



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Introduction

Since 2008, Greece has been a central site of eurozone crisis management. It underwent three economic adjustment programmes and some of the most sustained austerity measures in Europe.² Real GDP fell by roughly a quarter between 2009 and 2016, while unemployment, poverty and material deprivation rose sharply, with the heaviest effects concentrated among already vulnerable groups.³ Social vulnerability studies track rising risks of poverty and social exclusion, inequality and steep declines in disposable household income for middle- and lower-income households.⁴ For many young people, the crisis is the background condition against which adulthood has been navigated and imagined.⁵

Austerity also consolidated a core-periphery hierarchy within the European Union (EU). Southern member states were pushed towards internal devaluation, labour-market deregulation and welfare retrenchment.⁶ In Greece, youth and labour-market policy shifted towards neoliberal and flexicurity agendas, with an emphasis on supply-side reforms, lower wage floors and tighter conditionality. At the same time, security and activation for young people remained limited.⁷ Papadopoulos⁸ captures the outcome as flexibility without security. Youth unemployment exceeded 50% at the height of the crisis. Since then, headline unemployment has fallen substantially, but the dominant problem for many young adults has shifted towards precarious entry jobs, low pay, weak protection and a high cost of living that compresses independence, especially through housing.⁹

These dynamics are gendered. Feminist scholarship on austerity in Greece shows that women carried a disproportionate share of adjustment costs through job losses in feminised sectors, wage cuts and the withdrawal of public services that support social reproduction.¹⁰ Daskalaki et al.¹¹ argue that austerity intensified women's triple burden of paid work, unpaid care and domestic labour, pushing many out of formal employment and into unpaid or informal work. They frame this partial retreat into care as both a survival strategy and, at times, a quiet form

of resistance to deepening labour precarisation. In parallel, the infrastructure that can buffer gender inequality, such as childcare, welfare and anti-violence services, was weakened by cuts.¹² This raises exposure to poverty and dependency and reshapes gender relations across paid and unpaid labour.¹³

Young people have been among the crisis's main casualties. Even before 2008, youth unemployment was high and the familistic welfare model relied on households to absorb labour-market risk.¹⁴ Austerity strained that model. Kretsos¹⁵ shows how precarious work and unemployment reinforce each other, as short contracts push young workers repeatedly back into job searching and periods without income. Tightened eligibility criteria and benefit retrenchment left many young adults effectively outside social protection, increasing reliance on family resources that were themselves under pressure.¹⁶ Within this young precariat, gender remains consequential.¹⁷ Young women face higher unemployment rates and are over-represented in temporary, part-time and low-paid employment, often concentrated in crisis-hit sectors such as education, health and social services.¹⁸ Qualitative research on highly educated young women highlights a persistent mismatch between credentials and the jobs available, with repeated cycles through unpaid internships, casual service work and unemployment.¹⁹ For these women, education often produces a sense of blocked adulthood.²⁰

The long crisis also reshaped intergenerational mobility and wellbeing. Leontopoulou and Chletsos²¹ document upward educational mobility across three generations, yet show that the crisis reduced expected returns. Emerging adults report economic insecurity, diminished quality of life and a sharper sense of downward mobility compared with their parents, even when better educated. Together with evidence on the evolution of social vulnerability,²² this points to a reconfiguration of risk structured by age and gender. Youth transitions are delayed and fragmented in a context of deregulated labour markets, weak social protection and prolonged recession.²³

The EU continues to frame gender equality as a defining European value and a project with social gains.²⁴ At the same time, comparative research suggests gender has become a sharper line of political divergence among younger cohorts in Europe.²⁵ Work on digital feminism indicates that Millennial and Generation Z (Gen Z) men may experience prominent online feminist discourse as accusatory or exclusionary, even when they endorse equality as a principle.²⁶ Experimental research, by contrast, suggests Gen Z women can be mobilised by younger, more diverse, feminist-aligned candidates.²⁷

The European pattern is consistent with an emerging youth gender divide that does not map neatly onto voting behaviour.²⁸ Using European Social Survey data for the EU-27 plus the UK, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland, the Equalize comparative policy study reports a widening youth gender gap in left-right self-placement since around 2012, with the largest gap among 15-29 year olds. In the project's five case-study countries, the gap is strongest in Sweden, Spain and Poland, while Germany is the clearest exception. The study also finds that gender-equality attitudes show larger gaps among Gen Z, including around workplace discrimination, equal pay and sexual-harassment claims. Greece sits closer to the middle of the distribution, with more modest and relatively stable gaps across age groups. Voting gaps are weaker than attitude gaps, with larger youth differences in far-right voting visible in Poland and Spain, but not in Greece. How do precarious young people in a crisis context perceive gender equality when everyday security feels scarce?

This policy brief examines how young Athenians understand gender equality in a context of prolonged insecurity, and why equality can be endorsed as a principle while still being argued about as if recognition, protection and support were scarce. Drawing on three focus groups with 18-29 year olds in Athens (mixed-gender, women-only and men-only), it analyses how participants debated whether it was harder to be a man or a woman in Greece today and how they interpreted national and EU-level equality agendas. The policy brief develops the concept of *zero-sum equality talk* to

name a recurring register in which gender equality is discussed through comparative moral accounting, shaped by blocked independence, low institutional credibility and a public conversation experienced as distorted or unresponsive. The findings show that competitive framings intensify where participants describe cancelled-out policy gains, selective protection and captured opportunities, while rights-based boundaries become more salient around consent and bodily autonomy. The argument is that reducing youth precarity and strengthening durable, credible protection are central to loosening zero-sum interpretations and making non-zero-sum visions of gender equality politically plausible in a peripheral EU setting.

Conceptual approach and methods

Conceptual approach

The concept used in this policy brief emerged through the movement between the Athens material and the scholarly literature. In the early stages of coding, certain patterns kept returning. Participants spoke in recurring ways about insecurity, fairness, credibility and gendered harm. They often endorsed equality in principle, yet slipped quite quickly into arguments about who receives attention, who is protected and who is left behind. I then returned to the literature to clarify what, exactly, this pattern amounted to and what language best captured it. The result is the concept of zero-sum equality talk, which I use here as an interpretive lens.

Zero-sum equality talk names a recurring way of speaking about gender equality under prolonged precarity. In this register, equality is not rejected outright. On the contrary, participants may affirm it strongly as a democratic norm tied to fairness, rights and dignity. But when they turn to lived experience, institutional response or concrete policy, the discussion often shifts. Recognition, safety and support begin to appear finite. Gains for one group are heard as losses for another. Attention to one form of harm is experienced as coming at the expense of another. The same speaker can move within minutes from endorsing equality to questioning who

really benefits from it, whose suffering counts and whether institutions apply protection consistently.

This is crucial in a European setting, where gender equality retains strong normative legitimacy, but where specific measures and public debates often generate dispute, fatigue or ambivalence. Survey work suggests that support for egalitarian principles can sit alongside more traditional assumptions and scepticism towards policy instruments designed to advance equality.²⁹ At the same time, research on political attitudes reveals a youth gender divide in a number of European countries, with young women, on average, moving further left than young men over time in several settings.³⁰ That divergence has been linked to differences in how younger women and men encounter discrimination, safety, economic insecurity and political socialisation. It also sits within a public sphere saturated with moral cues; exemplary cases; and competing narratives about status, fairness and grievance.³¹ The Athens groups should be read against that backdrop, though the question here is how equality gets argued about when people feel materially exposed and politically unconvinced.

That question becomes sharper in Greece, where gender debates unfold within a social landscape marked by crisis, austerity and uneven recovery. Feminist political economy has long shown that downturns and welfare retrenchment intensify gendered inequalities through care burdens, labour-market segmentation, social reproduction and heightened exposure to insecurity.³² In the Greek case, the crisis and its aftermath also reworked everyday life in more durable ways, deepening stress, precarity and uncertainty across households, care arrangements and future planning.³³ Research on youth transitions in Greece shows that precarious work became a normalised starting point with lasting effects on independence, family formation and the ability to imagine adulthood as stable or linear.³⁴ More recent work suggests that, even where macroeconomic indicators appear less catastrophic, the post-crisis settlement remains fragile, with weak protections and persistent insecurity still shaping everyday life.³⁵ These conditions shape what feels realistic, what feels fair and what kinds of policy

claims people are willing to trust. When security is hard to secure and institutions do not appear dependable, questions about who receives support, whose claims are believed and whose needs come first become politically charged.

Research in psychology and political behaviour suggests that perceived scarcity and low social mobility can strengthen zero-sum beliefs about hierarchies and resources, making advances by one group seem like losses for another.³⁶ The focus groups show how zero-sum reasoning can be activated as a conversational resource. This kind of reasoning can become salient when institutions are distrusted, when policy is experienced as temporary or performative, and when recognition itself is imagined as unevenly distributed. Under those conditions, public claims are interpreted through comparative moral accounting. People ask who has it harder, who receives visibility, who gets sympathy and whose claims institutions are more likely to validate.

Three ideas follow from this. First, participants can endorse equality in principle while doubting how equality measures work in practice. They may support equal rights while treating specific protections, outcomes or policies as selective. Second, comparative accounting operates as a form of moral reasoning. Discussion moves towards questions of who is worse off, who gets believed, who gets jobs, who receives sympathy and who appears to have institutional backing. Third, this process is shaped by institutional trust and by the media and political contexts through which gender debates circulate. When public discussion is experienced as distorted, recognition itself can begin to feel scarce and unevenly distributed.

Methods

This study forms part of the FEPS Equalize project on youth and gender equality in Europe and uses a qualitative case-study design centred on Athens. Greece was selected as a crisis-hit, peripheral EU member state where long-run economic insecurity intersects with low institutional trust and persistent

gender inequality in work, care and safety. The aim was to generate interactional evidence on how young women and men reason about gender equality, vulnerability and policy responsibility in a context shaped by austerity and precarious transitions to adulthood.

The empirical material consists of three in-person focus groups with young adults aged 18-29 in Athens: one mixed-gender group; one women-only group; and one men-only group. Participants were recruited by Sago through targeted sampling and screening under dIpart's supervision. dIpart coordinated the qualitative research across the five country cases and authored the comparative qualitative chapter for the main FEPS policy study. Recruitment used quotas to secure variation by age, gender, occupational status, place of residence and party preference. Inner-city districts were excluded to avoid over-representing highly urban and politically saturated milieus. Across the groups, recruitment also sought to include participants with care responsibilities.

Each session lasted around 90-120 minutes and followed a semi-structured topic guide. Discussion began with everyday concerns and the experience of being young in Greece, then moved to gender equality, work, education, family life, public space and institutions. A central prompt asked participants whether it is harder to be a man or a woman in Greece today. This was used to surface how participants reasoned about vulnerability, fairness and policy responsibility. Two short elicitation tasks were also used: free associations for gender equality and feminism; and a short message to EU decisionmakers about gender issues.

All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The analysis draws on the English-language transcripts provided by the project team. Participants are reported through pseudonyms and group identifiers, for example: Anna, woman, mixed group. Where short exchanges cannot be linked securely to a single named participant, I identify the speaker by gender and group instead of assigning a false level of precision.

Analysis combined reflexive thematic analysis with close attention to focus-group interaction. Coding began with repeated reading and memo-writing, then moved through semantic and latent coding. Semantic codes captured explicit topics such as workplace discrimination, labour-market pressure, harassment, suicide, public safety and distrust in institutions. Latent codes captured recurring forms of reasoning, including competitive comparison, fairness under scarcity, credibility claims and disputes over who counts as vulnerable. The concept of zero-sum equality talk emerged abductively through this movement between the transcripts and the literature. Initial coding highlighted a recurring structure in which participants endorsed equality while treating recognition, support and protection as finite. The analysis then returned to the transcripts to test where that reading held, where it weakened and where participants shifted into a different moral register.

Analysis

The analysis moved in repeated passes between the transcripts and the concept developed in the conceptual approach section. I started by staying close to participants' wording, examples and evaluative terms. Several clusters appeared quickly across the three groups. Participants returned to blocked independence, housing and wage pressure, distrust in institutions, frustration with the media environment, and disagreement over what equality should mean in practice. A second cycle of interpretation brought these clusters into relation with zero-sum equality talk. That concept clarified a recurring move in the discussions. Problems were often framed through scarcity; cancellation; and unequal access to security, opportunity and recognition. I then went back through the transcripts to test where this reading held, where it weakened and where participants shifted into a different moral register. The findings that follow trace that pattern across the groups.

Blocked futures as lived constraint

Across the focus groups, discussion kept returning to the difficulty of building a life that feels stable, independent and open-ended. Participants described this through emotion, arithmetic and a recurring sense that adulthood has narrowed. Anna, a woman in the mixed group, spoke of “many obstacles” to financial independence and “the social issues we encounter every day”, then listed “chaos, stress, anxiety, uncertainty, sadness”. She explained that sadness as the feeling that “young people in particular suffer a lot when it comes to our independence and our dreams” (Anna, woman, mixed group). Participants were attaching material pressure to a damaged future horizon. Independence appears as something desirable and increasingly difficult to secure on ordinary terms.

Dimitris, a man in the mixed group, stayed within the same emotional field, though with more anger and irritation. He spoke of “chaos”, “mess”, “ridicule” and “a sense of inadequacy”, describing “a kind of dissatisfaction with the whole situation” (Dimitris, man, mixed group). The language conveys humiliation and compression. Participants are describing lives that feel squeezed, but they are also describing a setting that makes ordinary aspirations feel faintly absurd.

Yiannis, a man in the mixed group, moved from feeling to justice. He listed “unequal distribution, injustice, high cost of living, scandals and violence”, then translated the housing crisis into familiar arithmetic. Someone on “a thousand euros” gives up “half their salary” on rent before electricity and “basic expenses” enter the picture. He framed that as a failure in a society that claims the law is “blind and equal for everyone” (Yiannis, man, mixed group). Rent, wages and bills become evidence in a wider argument about fairness. The economy enters the discussion as a moral structure.

Anna, a woman in the mixed group, called housing “a very basic need” and spoke about the desire “to move into renting a place” (Anna, woman, mixed group). Dimitris, a man in the mixed group, used food prices as shorthand for the squeeze, saying that “souvlaki

literally doubled in price in five years” while “wages are the same” (Dimitris, man, mixed group). Anna returned to the mismatch between official income and actual life. With “€700” in minimum wage, “€400” in minimum rent, and modest leisure costing “€10-15”, “everything is very limited”, and the wish “to live our lives a bit and see a few things” becomes an “obstacle”. Her conclusion carries the force of repetition. “Not even a thousand euros is enough... Not even €1,500” (Anna, woman, mixed group). These passages are full of small calculations. Participants keep measuring what remains after the essentials. The answer is very little.

The women-only group expressed the same blockage through a slightly different vocabulary. Despina, a woman in the women-only group, said that what frightened her most was “indifference”, along with the “blatant deceit” of “politicians or anyone in power” (Despina, woman, women-only group). Nefeli, a woman in the women-only group, focused on a “lack of transparency”, “instability” and an “uncertain future”, saying that she felt she was “building on sand and a big wave can wipe it all out” (Nefeli, woman, women-only group). That metaphor captures the problem with unusual force. Effort is present. Stability is missing. Ground can disappear quickly. The wage-rent arithmetic in the mixed group and the image of “building on sand” in the women-only group show the same lived condition. Participants are trying to orient themselves in a setting where forward movement feels insecure and provisional.

These accounts establish the emotional and material backdrop against which the rest of the discussion unfolds. Once everyday life is narrated through blockage, deferral and attrition, equality claims are more likely to be heard through pressure. Participants are already thinking in terms of limits, trade-offs and fragile gains.

Fairness and competition

Once that background of instability had been established, discussion often shifted into a competitive account of fairness. Social life appeared

as a contest over access, protection and recognition. This was one of the clearest places where zero-sum equality talk became visible.

Nikos, a man in the mixed group, described the news cycle as repetitive and empty, saying that “for 20 minutes they talked only about deaths”. He then turned to wage policy. “They say, ‘We will increase the basic salary’. They increase it by €20-25. But at the same time, a week later, they raise the deductions by €20. So, you’re back to zero” (Nikos, man, mixed group). “Back to zero” condenses a broader perception in the groups. Gains feel temporary. Policy feels performative. Announcements create the appearance of change while lived conditions remain largely unchanged. Under those conditions, people begin to read outcomes through cancellation. Support exists on paper, disappears in practice and leaves everyone competing over marginal relief.

The same structure appeared in discussions of security. Marios, a man in the men-only group, contrasted the treatment of a celebrity with the treatment of a woman who sought help before being killed. “I think it was Vissi, or was it Vandí, who had a flat tire and the police escorted her to her concert. And the other girl who was about to be killed, they didn’t take her anywhere. And in the end, she was killed.” He summarised the issue as inequality “in how a police officer treats me versus how he treats a politician” (Marios, man, men-only group). Security is understood here as a selective good. It follows status and visibility. Once that idea enters the discussion, fairness ceases to look universal. It looks conditional, contingent and unevenly distributed.

Participants extended the same logic to youth support measures. Nefeli, a woman in the women-only group, argued that “Greece can no longer support today’s young people... it pushes them more and more to leave”, then mocked the familiar call for emigrants to return. “Return to what? To give them a job that pays €800 while rent costs 600? Leaving them €200”. Her conclusion was blunt. “I feel there is no hope and no solutions” (Nefeli, woman, women-only group). She then described a six-month support scheme for young dentists paying “€700 for six months”, before dismissing it as “Here’s something

to keep you busy for six months, now off you go. That’s mockery” (Nefeli, woman, women-only group). Temporary measures generate scepticism because participants assess them through what happens after they end. Support that expires quickly is experienced as management of instability.

The groups also framed opportunity as captured through networks and connections. Stefanos, a man in the men-only group, argued that meritocracy fails because “because of certain connections... you might lose an opportunity”, and because positions go to people who are “politically connected”, tied to “acquaintances of the faculty” or drawn from “well-known families” (Stefanos, man, men-only group). Access appears finite and biased. That perception deepens the scarcity lens. If jobs, status and protection circulate through connections, fairness starts to look like a contest from which many are already excluded. This is one reason equality claims are so easily pulled into arguments about allocation and advantage.

In the mixed group, Anna argued that women still face “problems in the professional sphere”, including harassment, employer power, lower wages and maternity-related penalties. She added that, as a freelancer, maternity leave was not meaningfully available to her, and that in architecture there remains an “unwritten rule” that a woman cannot easily supervise a construction site because “she won’t be taken seriously” (Anna, woman, mixed group). In the men-only group, the same issue appeared in a more ambivalent form. Christos, a man in the men-only group, argued that women could sometimes be preferred in hiring, but then described interviewers asking women near 30 whether they planned to have children. His conclusion was that a woman with better qualifications could lose her advantage once motherhood was made relevant: “boom – I gain the upper hand” (Christos, man, men-only group). These examples sharpen the zero-sum pattern. Work is not discussed simply as a shared field of precarity. It becomes a place where participants try to identify who is advantaged, who is penalised and which forms of inequality are recognised as legitimate.

These exchanges also show why zero-sum talk should be read as an interactional pattern rather than a settled ideology. Participants are reasoning through examples, comparisons and frustrations that emerge in discussion. The same person can affirm fairness in general terms and move seconds later into a much narrower account of how benefits, credibility or protection are actually distributed. The tension sits inside the talk itself.

Public conversation and distrust

A further layer in the data concerns the public sphere itself. Participants were critical of politicians, but also of a communication environment that felt repetitive, manipulative and detached from everyday concerns. Social media appeared less as a separate arena and more as part of the wider problem of visibility. In the mixed group, Nikos criticised digital activism, arguing that “posting a story” was not the same as action and that “digital activism undermines real activism” (Nikos, man, mixed group). In the women-only group, Danaï referred to watching political debate on her phone and argued that public discussion lacked pluralism. These comments suggest that participants move across different media and interpersonal discussion while implying that public problems are filtered through selective visibility.

Anna, a woman in the mixed group, linked this directly to media freedom, saying that “whatever I hear from the media is just deceit” (Anna, woman, mixed group). Nikos, a man in the mixed group, added that material of little value gets repeated “ten thousand times”, which gives it a strange authority through sheer frequency (Nikos, man, mixed group). Sofia, a woman in the mixed group, elaborated on this. “90% of what we see is not worthwhile... the news is constantly full of scaremongering”. She contrasted this with the limited attention given to “inflation” and “the cost of living”, and noted that detailed reporting on violence can become “marginally a guide on how to kill the next person” (Sofia, woman, mixed group). Her point was that violent cases are narrated in a procedural way, while structural issues, such as living costs, receive less sustained treatment.

Participants feel that the things structuring their lives remain under-addressed, while other issues are amplified through repetition or fear.

Visibility itself becomes part of the fairness problem. If the public agenda feels sensationalised and disconnected, participants are more likely to question whose suffering counts, whose stories gain traction and whose problems remain ignored. Recognition enters the discussion as a scarce and unevenly distributed resource. This helps explain why gender debates become entangled with media distrust. Claims about harm or discrimination are filtered through suspicion about agenda-setting, emphasis and public staging.

The women-only group gave this a more procedural form. Danaï, a woman in the women-only group, described watching debates on her phone and concluding that “there isn’t pluralism”. Programmes “bring their own people”, while what is missing is an “unrelated” person, “not very politically passionate”, who could be “objective”. She explicitly preferred something closer to the focus-group setting, with “more voices from ordinary people... not specific, ‘staged’ people” (Danaï, woman, women-only group). This comment deserves attention. Participants feel excluded from outcomes, but also from the forms through which public problems are discussed. Others choose the speakers, define the frame and decide what becomes publicly legible.

The same distance appeared in the discussion of elections. Marios, a man in the men-only group, explained that returning to one’s village to vote can cost “€400”, which means people may simply “end up not voting” (Marios, man, men-only group). Andreas, a man in the men-only group, added uncertainty about whether postal votes are counted properly (Andreas, man, men-only group). Participation itself becomes costly and faintly mistrusted. This strengthens the sense that institutions do not respond evenly to everyone and that voice itself is unequally secured.

Gender equality

Gender equality was usually affirmed at the level of value. The argument became clearly more unsettled when participants turned to implementation. This was obvious when the groups moved from abstract support for equality to concrete questions about who gains, who loses and who is believed. Petros, a man in the mixed group, said that he “fully agree[s] with equality”, but then argued that equality had become too closely associated with “percentages 50:50” and “equal representation in everything”. He called this “utopian” because people “are not identical in their preferences and their skills”, concluding that an “absolute 50:50 quota” in professions or parliament “is never going to be achieved” (Petros, man, mixed group). Equality is acceptable here as a principle. Equality as an outcome is treated as inattentive to difference.

Sofia, a woman in the mixed group, pushed in the complete opposite direction. She argued that gender inequality is “visible in representation” and that if the population is roughly “50:50”, then an “80:20” split in senior positions cannot be explained away through “capability” or “skills” alone (Sofia, woman, mixed group). Representation functions here as evidence of structural inequality. The disagreement between the two participants shows that one side reads uneven outcomes through preference and merit, while the other through exclusion.

The men-only group contained even more explicit claims that equality had begun to disadvantage men. One man argued that women were gaining “rights they shouldn’t have”, even while admitting that equality did not exist. Another argued that “it’s much easier to find a job if you’re a woman” and that men face more obstacles “in work, in achieving economic stability and in social environments” (men-only group). These claims show how male precarity can be translated into a gendered claim about displacement. Men’s insecurity is not described only as economic insecurity. It is framed as evidence that equality itself may now operate unevenly.

In the mixed group, a man argued that it is “clearly more difficult to be a man” because “80 to 90% of

deaths by suicide are men”, men have fewer “safety nets” and homelessness is more likely to affect men. Yet the same exchange also included recognition that sexism still exists and that women remain in the lower position. This movement is central to the policy brief’s argument. Participants move between different registers: from equality as a norm, to gendered harms as competing claims, to doubts over whose suffering receives recognition.

The short survey-style prompts reinforced this pattern. In the men-only group, several participants were very neutral on whether gender equality had reached the point where men are now disadvantaged, and two strongly agreed that dating inequality exists because women focus attention on a small share of men. In the women-only group, by contrast, participants strongly rejected the idea that women exaggerate workplace sexual harassment and reacted with disbelief when told that some men had been neutral on explicit consent. These differences show that the same equality agenda is received through different experiences of vulnerability.

Participants could support equality while expressing suspicion towards how equality measures are designed, communicated and enforced. Where institutions seemed selective, equality measures were easier to read as benefits channelled unevenly to some groups. In the mixed group, one participant wrote that feminism was “progressive, useful and manipulated”, explaining that it was manipulated by “parties” and “politicians”. In the same group, another participant wrote that gender equality was tied to “profession, taxation, rights” but also “unfeasible”. These were expressions of support filtered through mistrust over how equality is translated into different policy and societal areas.

Asking whether it is harder to be a man or a woman in Greece today encouraged participants to reason comparatively from the outset. This prompt was interesting because it surfaced the moral logics participants draw on when they assess vulnerability. It also created sequences of agreement and repair that revealed how comparative reasoning works in real time. The prompt certainly helped bring it into view.

Consent, bodily autonomy and the limits of scarcity talk

The strongest limit to competitive framing appeared around consent and bodily autonomy. In these parts of the discussions, the register changed. The language of rights and clear boundaries came through more forcefully. In the mixed group, when one participant asked whether explicit consent meant saying “I’m going to kiss you now”, another immediately clarified: “We mean normal consent. So, we mean being normal people”. When the discussion moved to refusal, another participant added, “100%, I’m raising my hand with the rest”, and the group agreed that “no means no” (mixed group). The same pattern appeared around abortion, where one participant said he would “take it even further” and that men “shouldn’t have any say in the matter at all” (mixed group). In the women-only group, participants reacted with disbelief when told that some men had been neutral on explicit consent, asking, “Men?” and “And they weren’t ashamed to say it?” (women-only group). These sequences are quite crucial because safety and bodily autonomy were treated as threshold issues. They did not attract the same degree of balancing that appeared in the discussion of jobs.

This section shows that zero-sum equality talk surfaces most readily when participants are dealing with institutions they do not trust, policies they experience as partial or temporary, and public communication they experience as distorted. Around bodily autonomy, a different moral language becomes available and holds more firmly. The boundaries are clearer. The room for comparative bargaining narrows.

The transcripts also contain moments where participants moved towards solutions, especially through education and longer-run cultural change. Lina, a woman in the women-only group, argued that “everything starts with education” and extended that idea beyond school. Parents should be supported “from the moment they leave the maternity ward”, given “five lessons” on how to teach a child. She added, “Give them psychotherapy, because I think 90% of our country is ‘un-therapised’, and that passes

on to the next generations” (Lina, woman, women-only group). This does show that participants can still imagine structural change, transmission and repair, even while describing politics as unresponsive.

Conclusion

This study traces a recurring way young people in Athens talk about gender equality under prolonged precarity. Across the focus groups, equality remained a legitimate and recognised democratic value. At the same time, recognition, safety and support were often discussed as scarce goods, unevenly distributed and easily cancelled out. Within that setting, conversations about whether it is harder to be a man or a woman in Greece frequently turned into comparative accounting. Harms were weighed against one another. Claims were measured in relation to competing vulnerabilities. Equality became harder to sustain as a shared basis for protection and redistribution.

The analysis shows that this orientation takes shape in interaction. It became sharper when participants moved into the pressures of everyday life. They described blocked adulthood through terms such as “chaos”, “uncertainty”, and the repeated deferral of “independence” and “dreams”, alongside practical calculations about wages, rent and rising prices. Insecurity was also tied to perceived deception and instability in the political field, with the future imagined as fragile, contingent and open to disruption. These accounts echo crisis-era work on austerity, vulnerability and youth transitions in Greece.³⁷ The focus groups add a more precise account of how equality is recast in conversation as an allocation problem under conditions of blockage.

Participants continued to speak about equality through the language of rights. This suggests that egalitarian norms still carry moral force, which is consistent with evidence showing that support for equality remains publicly legitimate, even where views are mixed or hesitant.³⁸ The strain entered when participants turned to institutions and lived experience. Policy action was often described as performative, inconsistent or short-lived. Measures

that looked positive in official terms were experienced as offset, reversed or withdrawn in practice. Scarcity therefore appeared in two connected forms. One was institutional, rooted in doubts about durability, consistency and equal application. The other was interpretive, rooted in the way participants made sense of recognition, support and fairness under pressure.

Several participants described the public sphere as being shaped by sensationalism, repetition and fear, while inflation and cost-of-living pressures seemed displaced or under-addressed. Others criticised formats that rely on “staged” voices and leave little room for ordinary people to speak in their own terms. These accounts show how participants connect mediated agendas to distributive suspicion. When the public conversation feels distorted or unresponsive, comparative grievance becomes a plausible way of interpreting whose problems count and whose do not.

Jobs, advancement and access were often described as being captured through networks, family ties or political connections. “Meritocracy” appeared in the transcripts less as a functioning norm and more as an object of scepticism. This resonates with scholarship linking low institutional trust to perceptions of biased allocation and uneven enforcement.³⁹ It also helps explain why equality claims are so easily drawn into competitive reasoning. Once access is experienced as already having been captured, fairness becomes something to fight over.

Participants also disagreed over what gender equality should look like in practice, including disputes over representation, quotas and whether gender equality has moved too far in some areas. In some exchanges, equality was interpreted as a redistribution of opportunity that disadvantages men, especially around work and status. In others, representation gaps and persistent exclusion were treated as evidence of structural barriers that remain hard to justify. These patterns speak to scholarship on contested feminist politics and perceived status threat.⁴⁰ The focus groups show how those claims are voiced.

Discussions of consent and bodily autonomy often moved into a different register. Here, participants drew firmer boundaries and relied more consistently on the language of rights, dignity and safety. There was little room for neutrality in these sequences. Zero-sum equality talk appears more readily where institutions are seen as unreliable and support is felt to be scarce. It loses some of that force where participants treat the issue as a threshold question of bodily integrity and harm.

The hinge question itself may encourage comparative reasoning by asking participants to decide whether life is harder for men or for women. Public narratives may also supply ready-made comparisons, especially in a media environment that participants themselves described as being saturated and repetitive. The present study cannot weigh those mechanisms against one another with precision. It can show why both become plausible in a context shaped by scarcity, institutional mistrust and weak confidence in public responsiveness.

Equality agendas are more likely to feel credible when they are linked to improvements in the material and institutional conditions that shape everyday vulnerability, especially housing, work and access to protection. When policy is experienced as temporary and public debate feels disconnected from ordinary life, equality measures are more likely to be read as selective interventions, rather than as part of shared provision.

For progressive policymakers in Greece, some implications follow. Implications that transcend the Greek case and are also relevant to EU policymaking on youth, gender, affordability and housing. Gender equality should be communicated as part of a wider security agenda for young people, including affordable housing, decent entry-level work, enforceable labour rights and access to care. This does not dilute gender equality. However, it is harder for equality claims to be heard as selective benefits for one group. Also, equality measures need visible durability. Short-term schemes, temporary allowances and symbolic announcements are easily read as performative when young people experience them as expiring before they change life chances.

Finally, communication should give more space to ordinary young people's accounts of work, housing, safety and care. The focus groups suggest that distrust grows when public debate is experienced as staged, repetitive and detached from everyday life.

In more practical terms, this means linking anti-discrimination enforcement to workplace inspections, making pregnancy and care-related discrimination easier to report, strengthening sexual education and consent education in schools, and treating youth housing as part of the gender-equality infrastructure. If equality is presented only through representation targets or abstract values, it remains vulnerable to zero-sum interpretation. If it is tied to credible protections, it is more likely to be understood as shared provision.

This study also has limitations. It is based on a small number of focus groups in Athens, recruited through a professional provider, and it captures a moment within a longer crisis rather than change over time. Group dynamics and question design may have intensified comparative talk. Those limits also point towards the next stage of research. Mixed-methods work could connect the discursive patterns identified here to survey measures of zero-sum beliefs and attitudes towards specific equality interventions.⁴¹ Longitudinal qualitative research could track whether zero-sum equality talk shifts as young people move through major transitions, such as leaving the parental home, entering more stable work or forming families.⁴² Digital research could examine how debates around gender-based violence, men's vulnerability and equality agendas circulate online and feed into offline talk, including the role of platformised communication in shaping interpretive cues.⁴³

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NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM**
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Javier Carbonell





POLICY BRIEF
June 2026

**SHARED INSTABILITY,
DIVERGENT
INTERPRETATIONS**

EXPLAINING SWEDEN'S
GEN Z GENDER DIVIDE

ABSTRACT
This policy brief on Sweden forms part of the Equalize project, a comparative investigation into whether, and if so why, gender divides in political opinion and voting patterns are emerging across Europe. The study draws on European Social Survey data, complemented by focus group interviews with over 100 participants in Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden. The results show that Sweden, despite being one of the world's most gender-equal countries, exhibits one of Europe's sharpest gender divides among generation Z. The divide does not stem from fundamentally different social realities. Rather, young women and men interpret shared experiences of instability differently, leading them to support different political solutions. This policy brief argues that addressing this divide requires policies that restore material security and rebuild trust in democratic institutions and the welfare state. Strengthening social cohesion further depends on visible political action, the promotion of inclusive gender norms and policies that bridge structural conditions with individuals' lived experiences of instability.

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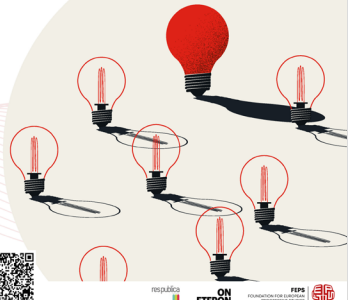
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**THERE MUST BE AN
ALTERNATIVE**
AGAINST MAINSTREAM DEFEATISM
AND TOWARDS THE REJUVENATION
OF THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPACE

Aurelien Mondon, Fran Amery, Katy Brown,
Emily Kendrick, George Newth, Alex Roman
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POLICY BRIEF
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**COUNTERING THE FAR RIGHT
IN THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT**

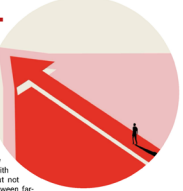
EXPLORING PROGRESSIVE
STRATEGIES IN THE AGE OF
FAR-RIGHT NORMALISATION

ABSTRACT
This policy brief examines the growing normalisation of the far right in the 2024-2029 European Parliament (EP) and offers a set of practical recommendations to guide progressive strategies in this evolving landscape. Part 1 defines the far right and maps its influence through three threat scenarios: full alignment between the European People's Party (EPP) and all far-right groups; EPP cooperation with the European Conservatives and Reformists but not with other far-right groups; and cooperation between far-right groups without EPP involvement. Part 2 assesses strategic responses, drawing on national case studies and findings from the academic literature.

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- First, maintain the remaining elements of the cordon sanitaire while developing complementary approaches to address the normalisation of radical-right positions and limit their symbolic influence.
- Second, strengthen cooperation among democratic, pro-European forces by building issue-based coalitions, enhancing coordination between national parties and their EP delegations, and further splitting the far right on divisive issues.
- Third, reject far-right narratives on migration and instead prioritise positive, solution-oriented messaging on social and economic issues that offer credible, policy-specific alternatives capable of resonating with voters.



**A New Gender
Equality Contract
for Europe**

Feminism and
Progressive Politics

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