

From provider to precarious: How young men's economic decline fuels the anti- feminist backlash

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Table of contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	4
What is happening?	4
Why is it happening?	6
What should be done?	10
Endnotes	13

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Executive summary

A new political divide is emerging in Europe: a growing gender gap among young voters, with young women trending progressive and young men increasingly turning to the far right. This paper argues that the rise of anti-feminist backlash among young men is not merely a cultural reaction to feminism but also the result of deepening economic precarity—particularly for working-class men without university degrees. Over the past two decades, young men have seen declining wealth, stagnating wages, lower employment rates, and worse mental health outcomes. In some EU countries, young women now earn more than men their age. This economic decline is not caused by women’s advancement but rather by structural economic changes, such as the rise in inequality and automation, which disproportionately affect men who occupy more manual jobs.

As traditional pathways to masculine status—such as stable employment, homeownership, and provider roles—erode, far-right actors have capitalised on this dislocation by offering a regressive but emotionally resonant vision of masculinity. This gender divide threatens not only gender equality but also the foundations of democratic support itself, as radicalised young men often express weaker commitment to democratic norms.

To reverse this trend, democratic forces must pursue a two-pronged approach:

- ▶ **Address the material roots of frustration** through ambitious economic policy: investing in housing, education, vocational training, employment security, and wealth redistribution for youth—particularly men without degrees.
- ▶ **Redefine masculinity** by promoting positive, inclusive male role models and creating new cultural narratives that empower young men without reinforcing patriarchal norms. Progressive visions of manhood must offer not only critique, but aspiration.

This is not a zero-sum battle between women’s advancement and men’s well-being. Both must be addressed together. If democratic actors fail to respond, the far right will continue to fill the vacuum—threatening gender equality, social cohesion, and the resilience of European democracy itself.

Introduction

In recent years, many European countries have witnessed a sharp rise in support for far-right parties and tenets, particularly among men under 25.¹ While some of this radicalisation stems from a backlash against the progress of feminism and a loss of male privilege,² this paper argues that the trend is also fuelled by an increasingly difficult economic situation for young men, particularly those with working-class backgrounds. Over the past decades, young men have seen a real decline in terms of income, wealth, employment rates, purchasing power, university education rates, and mental health.³ In several European countries, the gender gap has now reversed and women under 25 now earn more than young men.⁴ This decline has little to do with women's advancement in political representation or workforce participation but rather stems from deeper structural economic changes that disadvantage working-class and young people such as rising inequality or automation.⁵

By offering a traditional vision of masculinity, far-right movements have managed to successfully capitalise on the frustration associated with the loss of stable employment and financial independence – key traditional markers of masculinity.⁶ Conversely, democratic forces have largely failed to address young men's struggles in an electorally appealing way. More specifically, they have not been able to prevent the economic decline of young men, nor to articulate a progressive masculinity that is more appealing than traditional masculinity.

Today, there is a growing gender ideological divide among young people, with women being more progressive and men more conservative.⁷ Gender has emerged as a significant new cleavage for young voters, similar to how class or geography shaped electoral choices in past generations.⁸ This divide can enhance the electoral power of anti-feminist forces, threatening to roll back gender equality policies if they reach government. Moreover, this gender divide increases the risk for the future of democracy as cohorts of young men mobilised to the far right show lower levels of support for democratic principles.⁹

Any policy response aimed at countering far-right radicalisation and promoting gender parity must go beyond simply condemning misogyny. It should acknowledge the economic and social dislocation that many young men are experiencing and offer them an alternative vision of masculinity that aligns with progressive values. In more concrete terms, democratic forces and policymakers must implement a two-pronged approach: first, tackling the economic struggles of young men through policies that address housing, employment and education; and second, reshaping cultural narratives around masculinity to offer young men a positive vision of manhood adapted to modern times. Doing so will help to weaken the appeal of far-right ideology, helping to create a society that fosters gender equality.

What is happening?

THE GROWING GENDER VOTING GAP

Europe is experiencing an anti-gender equality backlash. In recent years, Bulgaria's courts ruled the Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women unconstitutional,¹⁰ Poland imposed a near-total abortion ban,¹¹ and Sweden scrapped its pioneering 'feminist foreign policy'.¹² This regression is also visible in media and culture. Social media has seen a surge in misogynistic content,¹³ a trend that is supported by tech oligarchs. Mark Zuckerberg, owner of Meta, recently argued that corporate culture needed more "masculine energy" and that "having a culture that celebrates aggression a bit more has its own merits."¹⁴

Europe is experiencing an anti-gender equality backlash.

The anti-feminist 'assault' is largely driven by far-right forces, which openly criticise gender equality policies and feminist discourses. Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni opposed "pink quotas,"¹⁵ French far-right politician Eric Zemmour decried the "feminisation of society,"¹⁶ and Spanish far-right party Vox rejected Spain's feminist laws because they "discriminate against men".¹⁷ While some far-right parties are overtly anti-feminist, others position women as leaders and adopt pseudo-feminist narratives like 'femonationalism', which blame migrant men for violence against women, exonerating "native men".¹⁸ However, they all share a rejection of "gender ideology" and pro-women policies.¹⁹

Far-right parties are gaining electoral ground, attracting two key groups: men and young people. Young men, in particular, are among their strongest supporters. According to European Elections Studies (EES) data, 17.2% of young men under 25 voted for a far-right party in the latest elections to the European Parliament – almost twice the 9.5% of young women.²⁰ The gender gap is even more pronounced in some countries. For example,

in Denmark, Portugal and Croatia, more than four young men voted far right for every young woman who did the same (Figure 1).

The European elections are not an exception. The gender ideological gap between young men and women is widening globally. While young women are becoming more progressive, young men are shifting ever further to the right.²¹ In Germany, the gap between conservative young men and progressive young women is 30 percentage points; in the UK, it is 25.²² In the last German elections, 26% of men under 25 voted for the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD), while 35% of young women opted for far-left Die Linke.²³

Thus, the increasing gender ideological gap is turning into a gender far-right voting gap. Gender has become a key cleavage shaping young voters' choices, much like class or geography did for previous generations.²⁴

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

The gender divide would not be alarming if young women were becoming more feminist while young men followed suit. While this has been the case regarding sexist attitudes (young men exhibit less sexism than previous generations), it has not been the case for support of feminist policies. Paradoxically, young men show greater support for gender equality than older men while also expressing more opposition to feminist politics and discourse.²⁵ Moreover, there is increasing

evidence that anti-feminist motivations are what drives young men to vote for the far right.²⁶ This means that feminist movements, as all transformative movements, are mobilising electorally not only supporters (mainly women) but also opponents (mainly men). In fact, the backlash is becoming nearly as strong as the push and, in some countries, such as the US, seems to have become even stronger.²⁷

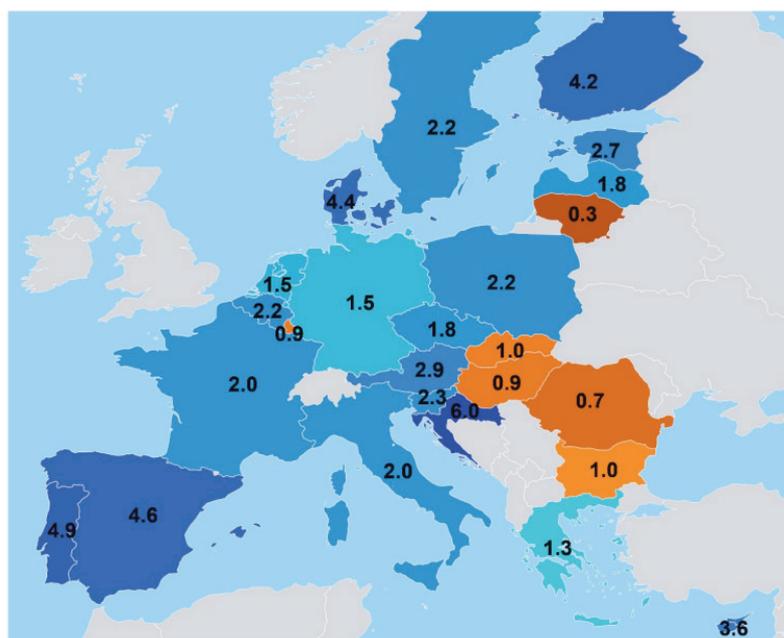
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The threat of far-right electoral victories is particularly significant in the European elections, where parties tend to perform better than in national contests.²⁸ Mobilising men is an electorally powerful strategy as they represent half of the electorate. Moreover, while women's turnout is usually equal to or slightly higher than men's in national elections, this pattern shifts in second-order elections like those to the European Parliament, where men have historically voted in greater numbers.²⁹ In the latest, 2024 EP elections, male turnout exceeded female turnout by more than 3% across all age groups.³⁰

Figure 1

FAR-RIGHT GENDER VOTING GAP AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE EU

Ratio of under-25 male to female far-right voters in the 2024 European Elections



Source: Created by Javier Carbonell with data from the European Election Studies (EES).

Electing anti-feminist politicians leads to a rollback of gender equality, as seen in far-right-led countries like Poland, Hungary, and the US, or in governments supported by the far right, such as in Sweden. These policies do not only impact women, they also restrict the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community. Bulgaria passed a law banning LGBTIQ+ “propaganda” in schools,³¹ US President Trump signed an executive order banning DEI (Diversity, Equality and Inclusion) measures taken by the federal government³² and Meloni’s government prohibited certain cities from registering children to both parents in same-sex couples.³³

Moreover, the impact of this trend goes beyond gender issues. The growing radicalisation of young men can also shape policies on the environment, migration and economic redistribution by electing far-right parties to office. Jordan Bardella, leader of France’s far-right Rassemblement National, has urged the European People’s Party to “suspend the Green Deal”,³⁴ Hungary built fences to stop incoming migration³⁵ and Trump has started implementing his mass deportation plan.³⁶

Why is it happening?

What causes this gender divide? Why are young men becoming radicalised?⁴⁰ The cause is often attributed to the rise of feminism⁴¹ or the polarising effects of social media,⁴² but these explanations are incomplete. This paper argues that the root cause lies in young men’s economic decline – particularly among those without tertiary education. The deterioration of economic standards has been driven by structural changes that have left young men less educated, earning less, and struggling to meet the traditional expectations of masculinity, i.e. being the “breadwinner” in their families.⁴³ The far right has successfully exploited this crisis by offering a compelling, though regressive, vision of manhood, which advocates that the cause of the decline is the progress of feminism instead of the real causes of rising inequality and automation.

INCOMPLETE ANSWERS

Social media is often cited as a driver of young people’s radicalisation, as it amplifies polarising and emotional content, spreads disinformation, provides a platform for unfiltered views, and lacks proper regulation.⁴⁴ While all this is true, it does not explain why radical narratives gain such traction, why certain discourses receive more attention than others, or why their impact varies so significantly between genders.⁴⁵

The second common explanation is that the backlash is a reaction to the advancement of feminism. This explanation is supported by the evidence.

Moreover, while far-right discourse often invokes social issues, far-right policymakers consistently vote against social policies in the European Parliament.³⁷

On the whole, these dynamics pose a significant threat to the future of democracy itself. Surveys show that younger generations – driven mainly, but not only, by young men – are less committed to democratic values than their older counterparts. In Poland, just 25% of 18 to 29-year-olds back democracy – 17 points below the national average. In France and Italy, the figures stand at 14% and 34%, respectively, with older Italians nearly twice as supportive.³⁸ In addition, many young people do not believe that they live in a real democracy, which makes them more susceptible to parties advocating systemic change.³⁹ This is not only a problem for today’s politics but also for the future, as successive generations of young men are socialised into far-right discourses. The radicalisation of young men, therefore, threatens to weaken democratic support – and no democracy can survive without democrats.

A survey of over 24,000 individuals from 30 countries found that 57% of Gen Z⁴⁶ men believed their country had “gone too far in promoting women’s equality.”⁴⁷

According to far-right parties and pundits, this phenomenon occurs because there is a “war on men”⁴⁸ and because gender equality laws promote false notions of gender and unfairly target men.⁴⁹ While debates on specific policies – such as punitivism, trans rights, and prostitution – are contentious even within the feminist movements,⁵⁰ the stark inequalities between men and women today suggest the opposite: feminism has not gone far enough. In the EU, women earn, on average, 12.7% less per hour than men,⁵¹ remain underrepresented in cabinets and among MEPs, and one third have experienced violence at home, work or in public.⁵²

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According to progressive interpretations, the reaction against feminism arises from a perceived loss of male privilege.⁵³ Similar to the far right, this perspective argues that feminism is the cause of the backlash. However, while the far right considers this reaction justified, progressives regard it as a harmful response to social progress. Challenging patriarchy and sexism require a shift from male dominance to gender equality, and power is rarely relinquished without resistance. Ample evidence supports this view.⁵⁴ For example, despite changing attitudes toward housework, the burden still falls disproportionately on women⁵⁵ - 91% of mothers spend at least an hour per day on housework, compared to just 30% of fathers.⁵⁶ Moreover, men have a long history of initially resisting gender equality measures and accepting them once they have been normalised in society.⁵⁷

While the pushback against the loss of male privilege explains much of the anti-feminist backlash, it is not the whole explanation for three reasons. First, it is not clear why it would affect young people more than older generations. After all, it is older (white) men who occupy most positions of power and have been the subject of much feminist criticism. Second, it cannot properly account for the paradox that young men's sexism is lower than that of previous generations but their opposition to feminist politics is higher. Third, it fails to recognise that there has been an economic deterioration of the situation of young people, particularly working-class young men, and that this decline is due to factors that are unrelated to feminism or the progress of women but to deeper structural economic changes.

THE ECONOMIC DECLINE OF YOUNG MEN

This paper shines a spotlight on the real decline young men have seen in terms of income, wealth, employment rates, purchasing power, university-education rates and mental health.⁵⁸ It also argues that these trends have little to do with women's advancement and are rather linked to deeper structural economic changes such as automation or the rise in inequality.

Housing is one key example of the economic struggles facing young people. It is the largest household expense in the EU,⁵⁹ and the situation has worsened in recent years. Since 2010, house prices have risen by 47% and rents by 18%, outpacing inflation.⁶⁰ The burden falls disproportionately on low-income households, urban residents, and young people. In Southern Europe, many do not leave their parental homes until after 30, meaning they gain independence only after they are no longer young.⁶¹ Today, housing works as a regressive tax on the young and poor, who are paying older, wealthier property owners for a place to live.

Young people's wealth and income have also declined compared to previous generations. In Spain, the wealth gap between those under 35 and those over 65 has been multiplied by nine since 2002.⁶² A study found that between 2008 and 2017, European young adults' incomes fell behind those of older generations, even in countries where youth employment increased.⁶³ Social mobility has also worsened,

making it far harder for working-class youth to move up the social ladder than in previous generations.⁶⁴

These trends are partly due to the rise in inequality in the West.⁶⁵ As income from capital outpaces income from work, wealthy individuals – who tend to be older, having had more time to accumulate assets – become richer at the expense of the working class and younger populations.⁶⁶ Moreover, the 2008 and 2020 crises particularly affected young people, increasing the prevalence of part-time and precarious jobs in Europe, which are disproportionately held by the young.⁶⁷ Fixed-term contracts, for instance, covered 43.3% of those aged 15 to 24 in 2015, compared with 14.1% of all workers.⁶⁸

While these developments affect both genders, other trends affect mainly working-class young men. Employment among women under 24 has risen for decades, while it has declined for young men. In many Western countries, employment rates are now either equal or higher for women.⁶⁹ Across Europe, the share of young men not in education, work, or job-seeking has steadily increased. In the UK, France, Spain and Canada, young men now outnumber women outside the workforce for the first time in history.⁷⁰ This decline is most pronounced among men without college degrees, as they dominate manual labour jobs – sectors that have shrunk in recent decades due to automation and globalisation.⁷¹

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In other areas, women's progress has far outpaced that of men, particularly in education. The gender gap in tertiary education continues to grow in favour of women. In the EU, while 48.8% of women aged 25-34 have a university degree, only 37.6% of men do (Figure 2). This trend is also visible for other European countries.⁷² In Norway, women now make up 60% of higher education students.⁷³ This shift has been dramatic over recent decades – in the UK, women accounted for just 31% of undergraduate degrees in 1970, rising to 58% by 2022.⁷⁴ As university education is linked to higher earnings, cultural capital and mobility,⁷⁵ this gap is likely to impact job competition in an increasingly competitive market.

Significant gender differences also exist in degree choices. Men still dominate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields, while women are overrepresented in HEAL (Health, Education, Arts and Literacy) disciplines.⁷⁶ Although STEM degrees often lead to higher-paying jobs, HEAL professions – especially in healthcare – are expected to grow in the coming years.⁷⁷ In Spain, for example, 70.6% of medical students are women.⁷⁸

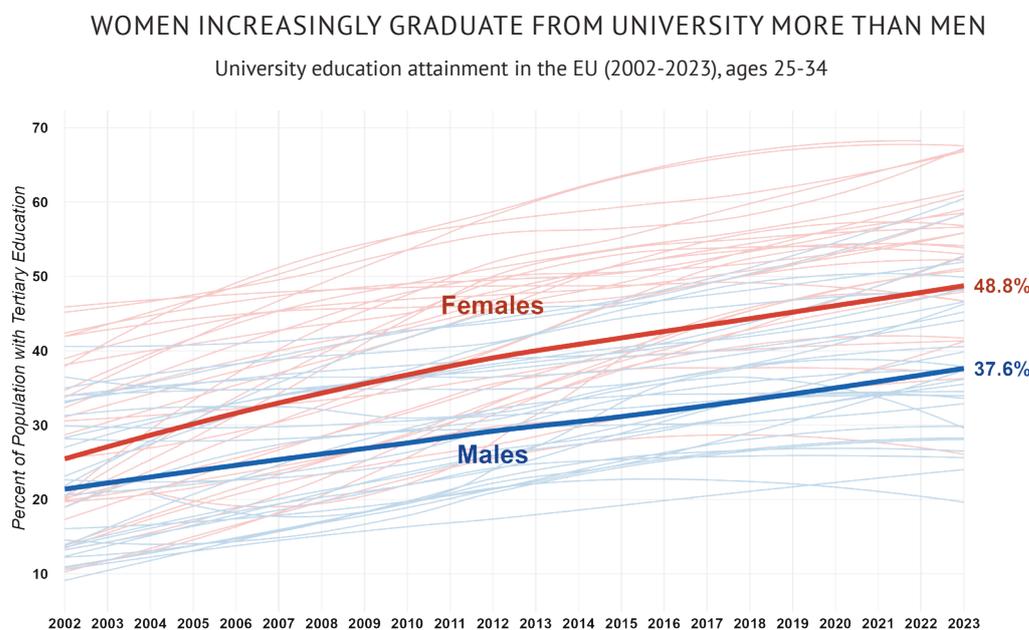
These trends have significantly impacted the gender pay gap among young people and in some European countries it has reversed (figure 3).⁷⁹ According to Eurostat data, while older and younger men still earn more than women under 25 in most EU countries, in countries such as Belgium,⁸⁰ France or Finland, young women now earn more than young men. Other studies also point to a reversal in the gender pay gap among the young in other countries. In 2022, for the first time, the average young woman in the UK earned more than her male counterpart, driven by higher female graduation rates and declining wages for non-graduate men. In 1991, non-graduate men earned 57% more than the average women, but by 2022, they earned 10% less.⁸¹ There is also evidence of this trend in Spain,⁸² Ireland,⁸³ and Germany.⁸⁴ In Luxembourg, the hourly gender pay gap of the whole population now slightly favours women, though men still earn more annually due to longer work hours.⁸⁵

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Gender inequality certainly persists, disproportionately affecting women. Beyond stark disparities in sexual assault and gender violence,⁸⁶ women report lower self-confidence⁸⁷ and face various forms of discrimination. Despite higher university graduation rates, tertiary-educated women earn only 77% of what their male counterparts make, largely due to underrepresentation in STEM fields.⁸⁸ Additionally, some of the key factors contributing to the gender pay gap become more pronounced after the age of 25. One significant example is the “child penalty” – the decline in income that women experience relative to men after having their first child.⁸⁹ This penalty tends to impact women more in their late 20s or early 30s, as that is when they typically become mothers. Furthermore, by the end of the working lifecycle, the gender pensions gap – the average difference in pension wealth between men and women – has been estimated at 30% globally.⁹⁰ Thus, as young women age, their economic situation is likely to deteriorate relative to men’s. Addressing both the struggles of young men and the long-term economic disadvantages faced by women is essential for fostering a more equitable society.

In sum, young people today face a broad decline in wealth, income, housing and mental health, but young men, particularly those without degrees, are hit hardest by shrinking employment opportunities and are falling behind in education. While some remain at the top of the economic and educational ladder, a significant share – especially of working-class men – has experienced

Figure 2



Note: Thin lines show individual countries (EU countries plus Iceland, Norway and Switzerland). Bold lines show the total EU population.
Source: Created by Javier Carbonell with Eurostat data.

downward mobility.⁹¹ This has led to a widening divide, with young men now occupying both the highest and lowest rungs of the social ladder. While it is important to focus on the top of the social structure, it is also necessary to look at the bottom, as young men are to be found at both ‘ends’.⁹²

These shifts are not driven by women’s progress but by structural economic changes such as automation, globalisation, prolonged weak growth, the rise of part-time work, and increasing inequality.⁹³ The fact that men work more in manual jobs that have experienced automation and thus layoffs is not the result of women’s workforce progress, but of the technological companies aiming to cut labour costs. Nevertheless, as a result, contemporary young men face a net decline compared to previous generations.

THE POLITICISATION OF THE FAR RIGHT

How are young men reacting to this trend? In theory, young men’s economic decline need not translate into support for the far right.⁹⁴ In fact, for much of the early 2010s, it did not.⁹⁵ Gen Z and Millennials⁹⁶ tend to vote in high numbers for anti-establishment parties across the political spectrum and in many countries, such as France, Spain, Greece or Germany, left-wing parties have been able to capitalise on this dissatisfaction.⁹⁷ However, since the end of the 2010s, the far right is increasingly able to exploit their discontent. This is due to several factors.

First, while young men’s economic decline is real, their response to it is shaped by cultural and gender norms. Masculinity remains strongly linked to the role of “provider” or “breadwinner,” with male identity largely defined by work.⁹⁸ Thus, the economic incapacity to live up to those expectations has outpaced changes in the cultural understanding of what it means to be a man.⁹⁹ The frustration produced by not being able to live up to the economic expectations of masculinity greatly affects men’s mental health and status.¹⁰⁰ In this context, calls to restore the provider role by blaming other groups are more appealing than the harder task of redefining masculinity itself.

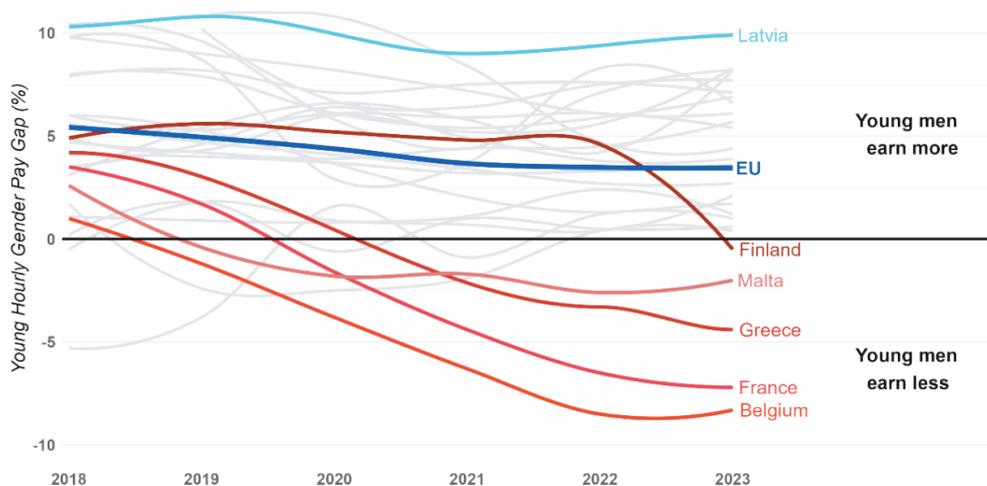
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Second, young people often compare their circumstances to previous generations. While young women are facing challenges like housing and job instability, they have also seen gains in education, employment and income.¹⁰¹ In contrast, the overall trajectory for young men has been negative, making them more susceptible to the far right’s nostalgic rhetoric.

Figure 3

YOUNG MEN EARN LESS THAN YOUNG WOMEN IN SOME EU COUNTRIES

Evolution of Hourly Gender Pay Gap under 25 year olds between 2018 and 2023 in Europe



Note: In 2023 in Belgium women under 25 earned 8.3% more per hour than young men, while in Latvia men under 25 earned 10% more per hour than young women.

Source: Created by Javier Carbonell with Eurostat data (data for enterprises employing 10 or more employees across all sectors).

Third, the fact that young men's economic decline has coincided with women's progress allows the far right to frame feminists as the enemy. Blaming feminism provides a clear, tangible target, whereas the true causes – structural economic changes – are more complex and harder to address.

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Fourth, far-right parties present a positive vision of masculinity, appealing to young men who feel their social status has declined. For example, one of the American far-right, neo-fascist militant organisation briefly endorsed by Trump is called "Proud Boys".¹⁰² It is well known that the search for social status of previously privileged groups – such as men, manufacturing workers, and white communities – is a crucial driver of far-right support.¹⁰³ These parties frame legitimate critiques of masculinity and patriarchy made by feminists as a "war on men" and portray male identity as under siege.¹⁰⁴ They promise to restore men's lost status, offering a vision of masculinity that, while preserving

privilege and sexism, speaks directly to young men's mental health struggles and economic anxieties.

In the manosphere – the varied collection of websites, blogs and online forums promoting masculinity, misogyny and opposition to feminism – social media content often provides guidance on overcoming financial and relationship difficulties, promoting solutions through discipline, exercise and wealth-building schemes like crypto investments. Unlike feminist discourses, which rightly critique harmful aspects of masculinity, backlash narratives do not call into question how traditional masculinity might be hindering young men's mental health, for example, by preventing men from seeking professional help.¹⁰⁵ Instead, they redirect blame to feminism while offering young men a sense of control over their circumstances. This message aimed to empower men is more appealing than the difficult process of confronting and dismantling male privilege.

In sum, the far right's politicisation of gender issues frames power relations between men and women as a zero-sum game. Feminism is portrayed as a "war on men," falsely blamed for young men's decline, providing an easy scapegoat for what are, in reality, broader economic and cultural shifts. Ultimately, by not calling into question the trends of rising inequality and automation, and by glorifying individual action, this narrative reinforces the very structures that have contributed to young men's struggles instead of addressing their root causes.

What should be done?

This paper rejects a zero-sum approach between supporting women and addressing young men's struggles. To advance gender equality both socially and electorally, it seems crucial to mobilise women while minimising male opposition to these efforts.

Given that the causes of the anti-feminist backlash among young men are both cultural and economic, it is necessary to implement strong economic policies for young people while also promoting a compelling vision of masculinity. A change in the discourse around masculinity will not be sufficient if the economic causes are not addressed. In a similar vein, improving material conditions will not change attitudes among young men without a powerful and convincing discourse. Both strategies are needed simultaneously.

A change in the discourse around masculinity will not be sufficient if the economic causes are not addressed.

Such policies should not come at the expense of policies supporting women – on the contrary, efforts to improve women's representation, income and security must be accelerated as well. This is not only for reasons of social justice – women suffer much more the effects of patriarchy than men – but also for electoral purposes. Backlash dynamics will take place whenever a movement pushes for change, but its impact depends on the tangible progress people experience.¹⁰⁶ While the measures outlined below aim to avoid voters (mainly male) opting for reactionary parties, feminist policy measures are meant to attract enough citizens (mainly women) to support the gender equality agenda. A weak feminist agenda will fail to outpace the backlash and ultimately lose electorally. However, ignoring young men's struggles also risks emboldening far-right parties. Simply put, if the progress of gender equality is to be maintained, democratic forces must not retreat but do *more*. They need to develop policies and discourses in support of both women and men.

ECONOMIC MEASURES

The first step towards addressing young men's economic struggles is to reverse the broader economic decline affecting them.

The EU and its member states must implement strong housing policies to help young people gain independence. This requires massive investment in housing construction through both private and public funding, rent controls in urban centres, restrictions on tourist apartments, and a significant expansion of social housing. While the EU has limited authority over housing policy, the new Commissioner for Energy and Housing can still take meaningful action. The EU can increase Cohesion Fund allocations for affordable housing, allow cities direct access to these funds rather than relying solely on regional authorities, and revise state aid rules to expand the definition of social housing beyond "disadvantaged citizens" to a broader, more inclusive category.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, housing affordability indicators should be incorporated into the European Semester to ensure that housing costs remain within a reasonable share of household income.¹⁰⁸

Policies to improve job stability, income and wealth for young people are also essential. One key initiative is the European Youth Guarantee, which ensures that all individuals under 25 receive a quality job, further education, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship within four months of unemployment or leaving formal education.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, unpaid internships should be banned across the EU, as all work deserves fair compensation.¹¹⁰

A universal inheritance offers a direct means of redistributing wealth from the rich and elderly to the young and economically disadvantaged. This policy would provide a lump sum to individuals upon reaching adulthood (typically between 18 and 25), tied to an economic, cultural or social project proposed by the recipient. Funded through progressive taxation on large fortunes, this measure would not only reduce wealth inequality but also stimulate the economy by promoting youth-driven investment and consumption.¹¹¹

The inability to start a family is a major consequence of young people's economic struggles.¹¹² While the workplace has evolved, childcare structures remain outdated.¹¹³ Expanding parental leave for fathers is crucial; EU countries should follow Spain's example by providing 16 weeks of fully paid, non-transferable parental leave to both mothers and fathers, ensuring fathers also take responsibility of their children. Promoting flexible working hours and remote work would further support parents, easing the burden on women and shifting the cultural perception of fathers from sole providers to active caregivers, leading to a more balanced division of responsibilities within families.

Additionally, as young men are currently less likely to pursue university education, expanding vocational training and increasing the number of technical schools is essential. Evidence suggests that vocational learning

benefits boys and men more than girls and women on average, making it a key strategy for improving young men's employment prospects.¹¹⁴

A major factor contributing to the gender pay gap is occupational segregation, with more men working in higher-paying STEM fields. While efforts have been made to increase female representation in STEM, true occupational balance requires action in the opposite direction—encouraging men to do traditionally female dominated jobs (e.g. nurses) or jobs that men are increasingly turning away from, such as teachers, doctors or psychologists.¹¹⁵

In the EU, 73% (3.8 million) of teachers employed in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education in 2021 were female, while men accounted for 27% (1.43 million).¹¹⁶ Moreover, more women than men are doctors (52.8%), with the proportion of female physicians in Romania and the Baltic countries reaching over 70%.¹¹⁷ Given the healthcare needs derived from the demographic transition we are experiencing, many more healthcare professionals will be needed. Attracting more men to teaching and nursing requires improving conditions for workers in these areas, creating specific campaigns and programmes targeted at making these jobs appealing to young men, and breaking down stereotypes about the gender of these professions.

While these measures are not exclusively for the benefit of young men, they would directly address their economic struggles and help mitigate the root causes of the backlash against gender equality.¹¹⁸

DISCOURSE AND GENDER NORMS

Alongside economic measures, there should also be a targeted campaign addressing gender norms and engaging men directly.

Many traditional aspects of masculinity exacerbate the economic struggles young men face. Since men tend to be more affected by job loss due to the deep connection they draw between employment and their sense of identity, and given their often weaker emotional and social connections, they struggle more than women to cope with mental health challenges because they lack a strong network that can support them.¹¹⁹ Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to reshape traditional notions of masculinity – not just for young men, but for society as a whole. While shifting cultural perceptions is a long-term process, policy interventions can play a crucial role in facilitating change.

The EU should promote institutional campaigns that support young men's mental health, normalise emotional vulnerability, and combat gender-based violence. As part of the next EU Gender Equality Strategy, the Commission should place greater emphasis in its media and cultural initiatives on the specific challenges young men face. Additionally, the EU should support the creation of centres dedicated to exploring

and redefining masculinity, such as Plural, the Centre for Masculinities in Barcelona.¹²⁰ These centres offer men access to educational and cultural programmes, mental health support and sports activities, providing alternative models of masculinity that foster well-being and social inclusion. Expanding such initiatives across Europe would help young men navigate economic and emotional struggles while promoting gender equality.

Beyond policy measures, there is a pressing need to reshape public discourse around men. Those advocating for gender equality must present a compelling counter-narrative to the far right's idealised vision of traditional masculinity. At present, democratic forces have failed to convincingly articulate not just the benefits of feminism for men, but also a vision of masculinity that affirms positive male traits. Group esteem plays a crucial role in shaping political identities, yet gender equality movements have largely neglected to offer men a sense of belonging within their framework. Positive male role models remain scarce, and media discourse often focuses on dismantling patriarchy without complementing this critique with an inspiring vision of what masculinity can be.¹²¹ To engage men more effectively, democratic forces should highlight the masculine values it upholds while showcasing real-life examples of men who embody progressive and inclusive

forms of masculinity. Providing this alternative vision could help counteract the far right's appeal and foster greater support for gender equality.

In sum, a truly comprehensive approach to gender equality must include young working-class men in analysis, policies and initiatives, while advancing feminist policies and mitigating the anti-feminist backlash. Given that the growing influence of the far right on young men poses a serious risk of reversing gender equality gains, this group's economic decline should be a matter of urgent concern for European democratic forces.

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