



Beyond the Gender Wars

How Liberals Can Bring
Young Men and Women
Back Together

Abstract

Across Europe, young men and women are experiencing an unprecedented gender divide, with growing differences in their views on politics, relationships, and gender roles. Powerful forces – from social media algorithms and toxic influencers to dating apps – are pushing young people into separate worlds. This policy paper, developed as a result of a stakeholder meeting organised by the ELF on the topic, explores why this divide has emerged and presents liberal solutions. Rebuilding trust and mutual understanding between young men and women is not only about improving relationships, it is essential for the future of liberal democracy.



Lisa Lundgren

Policy and
Research Fellow
at the European
Liberal Forum



Across the world, young men and young women are increasingly drifting apart in their political opinions. The widening 'gender divide' is not only visible in voting behaviour but also in everyday beliefs about relationships, gender equality, identity, and fairness.

Key Policy Recommendations:

- On an individual level, learn how to spot signs of radicalisation and misogyny/misandry among people in your circle and initiate non-judgemental, open conversations with those who might be in the risk zone.
- Include courses on relationship-building, digital literacy, and gender equality in schools. Make sure that students learn these things from an early age, through workshops and discussion groups.
- Ensure that appropriate female and male role models are being provided to children by introducing movies and books that have such characters in schools.
- Monitor and defend the Digital Services Act (DSA) as court cases progress, explore verified digital identities to reduce anonymity-driven toxicity, and push for greater algorithmic transparency on digital platforms.
- Support the development of AI-based fact-checking tools embedded in digital platforms or available as extensions.
- Back community-owned, non-corporate social media platform alternatives, and dating apps that redesign power dynamics between the genders.
- Invest in 'third spaces' in the local community and organise festivities and events.
- Encourage co-living by building bigger apartments and more shared student dorms in European cities.
- At the city level, support bars and clubs financially to make nightlife more attractive, incentivising people to go out and connect with one another.
- To encourage people to find their ways back to the dance floor, prioritise safety around clubs and bars in city centres, for example by investing in 'angels'.



European survey data from ALDE show that young women are increasingly progressive in their political and social attitudes, while young men are becoming more conservative.

Introduction

Across the world, young men and young women are increasingly drifting apart in their political opinions. The widening 'gender divide' is not only visible in voting behaviour but also in everyday beliefs about relationships, gender equality, identity, and fairness. As these differences deepen, they risk giving rise to a generation that is more polarised along gender lines than any before it¹

Survey data from 2025 show that men and women belonging to Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) are more divided than those of any other generation on key questions about gender roles and equality.² The survey included almost 24,000 people across 30 countries. Compared with respondents from other generations, Gen Z showed the greatest gender gap in attitudes toward whether individuals define themselves as feminists, whether men are expected to do too much to support equality, and whether progress toward women's equality has gone so far that it discriminates against men.³

European survey data from ALDE show that young women are increasingly progressive in their political and social attitudes, while young men are becoming more conservative. This divergence extends beyond political ideology to include views on gender roles, equality, economic opportunities, relationships, polarisation, and optimism about the future.⁴ In other words, the gender divide among young people is not limited to right/left politics; it reflects broader differences in young men's and young women's lived experiences, their understanding of how the world works, and how they envision the future.

At the same time, social patterns among young people are shifting in ways that might further deepen this divide. Fewer young people are forming romantic relationships, and new social phenomena such as 'heteropessimism', where

¹ King's College London (2025), 'Gen Z men and women most divided on gender equality, global study shows', 5 March, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/gen-z-men-and-women-most-divided-on-gender-equality-global-study-shows>.

² On the definition of Gen Z, see Library of Congress (n.d.), 'Generations', <https://guides.loc.gov/consumer-research/market-segments/generations>.

³ King's College London (2025), 'Gen Z men and women most divided on gender equality'.

⁴ ALDE Research (2024–2025).

individuals experience negativity or discouragement about relationships with the opposite sex, is being spread on social media.⁵ Young men and women tend to inhabit vastly different social media landscapes and their own political opinions may be reinforced by online masculinity or femininity influencers, which further amplifies the gender divide.

This phenomenon is concerning not only because it affects relationships between individuals, but because it has broader implications for democratic societies. Polarisation can deepen mistrust, worsen social isolation, and create fertile ground for radicalisation and political extremism. When young men and women increasingly view each other as scapegoats or enemies rather than partners in building a prosperous society, the foundations of democratic dialogue and cooperation are weakened.

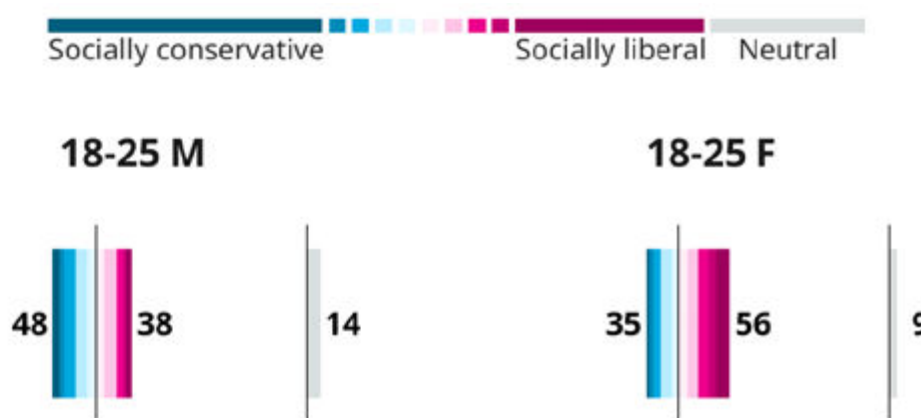
Addressing and finding solutions to this growing divide must therefore be a top priority for liberals who value a deliberative democracy based on dialogue and mutual understanding. How can societies support young women and men in cultivating meaningful connections with themselves, with each other, and with democratic institutions? How can policymakers counter polarisation while fostering a positive and inclusive narrative about gender equality? These questions and more were addressed in a stakeholder workshop organised by ELF. The outcome of those discussions can be found in this paper, particularly in the second part, which presents policy solutions. Based on data from a variety of sources, discussions from the stakeholder event, and an optimistic liberal outlook, this paper identifies constructive pathways forward to encourage a more cohesive and resilient young generation.

⁵ M. Tamasco (2025), 'Young men shifting to political right has caused women to distrust dating apps, says Atlantic writer', New York Post, 21 August, <https://nypost.com/2025/08/21/media/young-men-shifting-to-political-right-has-caused-women-to-distrust-dating-apps-says-atlantic-writer/>.

Causes of the growing gender divide

The opinion gap between young men and women is a fact. Data from various global surveys indicate that young men in Europe are more likely to identify as socially conservative, while young women in Europe are more likely to identify as socially liberal.⁶

Figure 1. Young men and women on the liberal-conservative scale.



Source: ALDE (2024–2025).

Young women are more supportive of social equality and gender equality issues, and more pessimistic about the future, compared with young men.⁷ Additionally, more men than women report that they want to get married and start a family.⁸ It is important to understand how these gendered opinions have emerged if we are to figure out how we can tackle them. Research suggests that the emergence of the gender divide can be explained by social media algorithms and influencers, the dating culture, as well as the education gap between men and women.

⁶ King's College London (2025), 'Gen Z men and women most divided on gender equality'; ALDE Research (2024–2025).

⁷ ALDE Research (2024–2025)

⁸ Merlin Strategy (2026), 'Polling for the New Statesman', 16 April, <https://www.merlinstrategy.com/recent-polling>.

Social media algorithms and influencers

Over 80% of young Europeans use social media daily, spending on average around three hours per day on these platforms.⁹ A recent Eurobarometer survey showed that 65% of young Europeans identify social media as their main source of information on political and social issues.¹⁰

Regardless of whether young people intentionally use social media to increase their political awareness, the content they are exposed to undoubtedly shapes their political opinions. Algorithms tend to prioritise content similar to what users have previously interacted with, which can create so-called filter bubbles that limit exposure to differing perspectives.¹¹ Additionally, social media algorithms are designed to keep the user on the platform for as long as possible, which means that extreme content that generates more views and comments is preferred. As a result, extreme and radical views on topics such as gender roles or feminism spread more easily on social media platforms and shape the views of the user.¹²

Social media influencers also play a significant part in driving political attitudes online. Both female influencers who advocate for women's empowerment and male influencers who promote stereotypically masculine attributes impact their followers' perceptions of gender roles. The term 'manosphere' is increasingly used to describe online communities that produce content on men's issues and advocate traditional masculinity. Influencers, podcasters, and lifestyle coaches prominent in the manosphere argue that feminism and gender equality have progressed at the expense of men's well-being. Thus, they promote the idea that men must reclaim power by increasing their material wealth, improving their physical appearance, and asserting dominance over others, particularly women.¹³

A study from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia found that 63% of young men regularly engage with content from masculinity influencers. Compared with men who do not engage with such content, those who do are significantly more likely to endorse attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours associated with traditional masculinity, and to hold more negative views of women.¹⁴

⁹ Joint Research Centre (JRC) (n.d.), 'The JRC explains: Why are children and adolescents vulnerable to social media?', European Commission, https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-explains/why-are-children-and-adolescents-vulnerable-social-media_en.

¹⁰ Eurobarometer (2025), 'Social Media Survey 2025', European Union, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3592>.

¹¹ Techopedia (2024), 'Filter bubble', 11 June, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/28556/filter-bubble>.

¹² Movember Institute of Men's Health (2025), 'Young men's health in a digital world' [report], <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/d6x1mtv1/mo-com-production/e1054b901ac235e16f177a2bca8ee760fb8e6a19.pdf>.

¹³ UN Women (2025), 'What is the manosphere and why should we care?', 15 May, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-should-we-care>.

¹⁴ Movember Institute of Men's Health (2025), 'Young men's health'.

The 'femosphere' has emerged as a response to the manosphere, reflecting similar dynamics in online spaces oriented toward women. In the femosphere, female influencers often encourage women to cultivate their self-worth and set boundaries, especially when it comes to dating. However, some content also promotes negative attitudes toward men and strategies on how to gain power over the opposite gender.¹⁵ The online culture in which young women take part can thus generate a negative view of men, especially considering that young women use social media to a larger extent than their male peers.¹⁶ Data from the UK indeed show that young women have a more negative view of men than young men have about women.¹⁷

In sum, as young men are increasingly exposed to male influencers who promote traditionally masculine traits and demonise women, while young women are exposed to female influencers who promote feminist values and demonise men, the gap in their political views widens. Should this trend continue, sympathy and understanding for each other is likely to decrease, leading to a negative 'us versus them' dynamic. For liberals this is especially problematic, given that it causes people to view each other not as individuals, but rather in terms of (negative) group stereotypes.

The embarrassment of having a boyfriend

Secondly, dating culture has changed significantly in the last years, as highlighted in the widely discussed *Vogue* article 'Is having a boyfriend embarrassing now?'. The article argues that having a boyfriend was once something young women wanted to display on social media, as it was seen as an achievement, whereas today being in a relationship can even harm social media engagement. The author suggests that being single, once viewed as a personal failure, is increasingly seen as desirable among young women, describing it as 'another nail in the coffin of a centuries-old heterosexual fairytale that never really benefited women to begin with'.¹⁸ This shift reflects changing attitudes towards dating and relationships, particularly among young, straight women.

Modern dating culture has increasingly shifted to apps, which has created a market-like dynamic where users perceive an abundance of options and can quickly move on if a match does not seem promising. Research shows that as

¹⁵ C. Newkey-Burden (2026), 'What is the femosphere?', The Week, April, <https://theweek.com/politics/what-is-the-femosphere>.

¹⁶ S. Maguire (2026), 'Young women are radicalising', New Statesman, 5 January, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2026/01/young-women-are-radicalising>.

¹⁷ S. Maguire (2026), 'Revealed: the new radicalism among young women', New Statesman, 15 April, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/polling/2026/04/revealed-the-new-radicalism-among-young-women>; Merlin Strategy (2026), 'Polling'.

¹⁸ C. Joseph (2025), 'Is having a boyfriend embarrassing now?', Vogue, 29 October, <https://www.vogue.com/article/is-having-a-boyfriend-embarrassing-now>.

people are presented with more options through dating apps, they become more likely to reject potential partners. Rather than bringing users closer to finding a match, the constant stream of profiles can instead create dissatisfaction and pessimism, leading users to gradually 'closing themselves off'. This tendency is also stronger among women, who are already found to be more selective than men on dating apps.¹⁹

Research shows that women receive significantly more attention on dating apps than men do, and that women are pickier than men.²⁰ For example, a study from the dating app Bumble found that a majority of women preferred male partners who were at least six feet tall, effectively eliminating 85% of potential matches.²¹ This also illustrates how online dating encourages filtering based on easily observable and often superficial traits that are displayed on dating apps.

In contrast to offline environments, where attraction may develop over time and surpass differences in opinions or backgrounds, these mechanisms limit opportunities for connection. As dating app users are becoming more fatigued about having their time wasted, they might feel that the earlier potential matches reveal their political opinions or other traits that might be 'dealbreakers', the better.²² This mentality reduces users' willingness to invest in getting to know people with hobbies or opinions different from their own, as alternatives are always immediately available. This dynamic reinforces filter bubbles and polarisation on the dating scene.

Repeated experiences of rejection among men may contribute to lower self-esteem, perceptions that women hold unrealistic expectations, and resentment toward women. In addition, the shift to online dating reduces opportunities to practise face-to-face interaction, making in-person social situations feel more intimidating. Counterintuitively, although dating apps make potential partners more accessible, they may also make real-life interactions more challenging, especially for young people who are new to the dating scene.

¹⁹ T. M. Pronk and J. J. A. Denissen (2020), 'A Rejection Mind-Set: Choice Overload in Online Dating', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 11(3), 388–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619866189>.

²⁰ StudyFinds (2025), 'Men keep swiping out of their league on dating apps, and research shows it rarely works', 23 July, <https://studyfinds.org/men-keep-swiping-out-of-their-league-on-dating-apps/>.

²¹ The Economist (2025), 'The rise of singlehood is reshaping the world', 6 November, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/11/06/the-rise-of-singlehood-is-reshaping-the-world?utm_campaign=editorial-social&utm_content=discovery.content&utm_medium=social-media.content.np&utm_source=linkedin.

²² O. McCrea-Hedley (2024), 'When did dating become all about the politics?', *Service 95*, 8 February, <https://www.service95.com/the-politics-of-dating-apps>.

In sum, the combination of changing gender norms and the digital dating culture risks turning dating into 'partner-shopping', where individuals evaluate potential partners based on fixed criteria rather than on connection. Critics argue that this dynamic can amplify a dating culture where 'authenticity takes a back seat to strategy'.²³

Campus girls and passport bros

Thirdly, the widening education gap between men and women may contribute to feelings of frustration between the genders. The higher education trend among young people is clear. Almost 55% of tertiary students in the EU are female. Greece is the only EU country where women are not in the majority, with women representing approximately 49.7% of tertiary students. There are also clear differences in the fields of study chosen by young men and women. Women are overrepresented in business, administration, and law as well as in health and welfare, while men are more likely to study engineering, manufacturing, or construction.²⁴

These trends may have important implications for relationships and views of gender among young people. Individuals tend to want to form relationships with partners who have similar levels of education, and women are more likely than men to prefer a partner with a higher level of education.²⁵ As women increasingly dominate higher education, heterosexual women will have to choose among fewer men. At the same time, men with lower levels of education may feel economically or socially insecure when they get rejected by more highly educated women, which can result in feelings of anxiety or resentment against women.

Young women's increasing focus on education and careers, alongside the rise of traditional gender norms among young men, has contributed to the emergence of so-called 'passport bros'. These are typically young men from Western countries who perceive women in their home countries as too career-oriented or unwilling to conform to traditional gender roles, which might harm their own self-esteem or masculine identity. Therefore, these men travel to less economically and socially developed countries to seek partners. These passport bros often benefit from greater relative wealth and social status abroad and have an easier time finding partners who value traditional gender roles there.²⁶ This showcases how

²³ Newkey-Burden (2026), 'What is the femosphere?'.

²⁴ Eurostat (2025), 'Tertiary Education Statistics', June, European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics#:~:text=Poland%20\(1.7%25\).-,Participation%20in%20tertiary%20education%20by%20sex,all%20of%20the%20EU%20countries](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics#:~:text=Poland%20(1.7%25).-,Participation%20in%20tertiary%20education%20by%20sex,all%20of%20the%20EU%20countries).

²⁵ Economist (2025), 'The rise of singlehood'.

²⁶ J. Meszaros (2025), 'From "mail-order brides" to "passport bros," the international dating industry often sells traditional gender roles', The Conversation, 21 November, <https://theconversation.com/from-mail-order-brides-to-passport-bros-the-international-dating-industry-often-sells-traditional-gender-roles-268616>.

the growing educational gap between the genders can create friction and give rise to new ultra-conservative movements.

Finally, education is a strong predictor of values and political attitudes later in life, and differences in educational attainment and occupational sectors can shape social networks and attitudes. This way, the structural differences in men's and women's educational levels and fields may reinforce the diverging opinions between men and women in the future.

The gender divide as a driver for polarisation and radicalisation

One major risk of the growing gender divide is the spread of hostility and increasingly extreme attitudes toward the opposite sex. As young men and women become more ideologically separated, there is a greater risk that negative stereotypes, misogyny, and misandry will intensify. Reduced real-life interaction and decreasing empathy for the opposite gender's experiences can reinforce the echo chambers in which such view proliferate, potentially exacerbating polarisation.

A second risk is rising levels of loneliness, particularly involuntary loneliness. Being single is not necessarily something negative – for example, women who were traditionally dependent on their husbands for financial reasons can now get their own jobs and have higher standards when choosing a partner, which naturally is a good thing.²⁷ However, loneliness is increasingly recognised as a public health concern in countries such as the UK and Sweden. Research has found that loneliness among young people is associated with more mental distress, worse mental well-being, poorer physical health, and higher healthcare service use.²⁸ Loneliness can also be linked to political extremism and susceptibility to radicalisation.²⁹

The combination of a growing gender divide, reduced face-to-face interaction, increased time spent on the internet, and the spread of traditional gender norms may contribute both directly and indirectly to more polarised and extreme attitudes. Over time, this dynamic risks creating a loop in which social disconnection and ideological division reinforce one another.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ N. Morrish, A. Spencer, and A. Medina-Lara (2025), 'How Loneliness Relates to Health, Wellbeing, Quality of Life, and Healthcare Resource Utilisation and Costs across Multiple Age Groups in the UK', PLOS ONE, 20(9), e0327671. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0327671>.

²⁹ D. Peterson, M. Rooduijn, F.-R. Hopp, G. Schumacher, and B.-N. Bakker (2025), 'Loneliness Is Positively Associated with Populist Radical Right Support', Social Science & Medicine, 366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.117676>.

In sum, the widening gender divide comes with significant societal risks. A clear understanding of these dynamics is essential for developing effective responses. The following section outlines liberal policy recommendations and solutions.

Liberal policy proposals to reconnect the young generation

So, how can we support young women and men in building meaningful relationships and mutual understanding? Finding solutions to the growing gender divide is not an easy task. Therefore, the European Liberal Forum invited a diverse group of stakeholders and experts to a workshop to jointly discuss what the solutions might be. Some of those policy proposals are included at the end of this policy paper.

Person-to-person communication

From a liberal approach, both public policy and individual responsibility play an important role in solving the gender divide. A first step is to learn how to identify signs of radicalisation in young men and women around us. If you notice a friend, a sibling, or your child making sexist jokes, becoming more secretive about what they do online, or expressing increasingly negative views of the opposite gender, it is crucial to speak up. Staying silent risks allowing these attitudes to deepen.³⁰

Human conversation is one of the most effective ways to break out of toxic online filter bubbles. Sit down and talk in a non-judgemental way. Ask them whom they follow on social media, where they get their information, and how they think about source criticism, as well as relationships and gender equality. These conversations may feel uncomfortable, but they matter. There are also various resources that can help guide these discussions, such as those made available by UN Women.³¹

Summary:

- Learn how to spot signs of radicalisation and misogyny/misandry among people in your circle, and initiate conversations with those who might be in the risk zone.

³⁰ UN Women (2025), 'How to counter the manosphere's toxic influence', 15 May, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-counter-the-manospheres-toxic-influence>.

³¹ UN Women (2025), 'How to talk to kids about gender equality and stereotypes', 13 May, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-gender-equality-and-stereotypes>.

Education

Outside the closest circle of family and friends, schools across Europe have significant potential to prevent and reduce the gender divide.

First, schools should play a greater role in developing students' social skills and emotional intelligence. Schools should teach students how to form and maintain romantic and non-romantic relationships.³² This could be done, for example, through regular workshops on themes like conflict resolution, empathy, communication, and friendship-building. Alongside this, schools should create structured spaces where students can discuss experiences within their own groups and engage in conversations across genders. These discussions should not revolve around portraying either men or women negatively. Instead, they should be respectful, honest, and focus on educating each other and finding a way forward. By fostering constructive dialogue from an early age, schools can help young people resist the polarising narratives promoted by extremists and instead practise listening, empathy, and cooperation. Change begins by having these conversations from an early age, even if they seem uncomfortable at first.

Second, schools play an important role in teaching students about digital literacy, including source criticism, as well as about gender norms and gender equality. It is not expected that all teachers are experts in digital literacy or gender norms, but inviting external speakers who are could be a solution. An example of a valuable exercise that the teacher or external lecturer could do is to show what sort of online content girls get to see about boys and boys get to see about girls, followed by a critical discussion. Equipping students from an early age with a questioning mindset makes them more resilient to harmful and polarising online content.

The third proposal is to promote positive role models. Young people may seek to emulate the characters they encounter online, on TV, in books, and in their day-to-day life. While we have seen a rise of positive female role models in recent years (for instance, strong female characters in children's movies or female pop stars who are outspoken about feminism), there are fewer male role models who stand up for equality. Schools can play an important part in curating what kind of culture and media students are exposed to. By reading books or watching movies with male and female characters that can act as positive role models, students can learn healthier ways of thinking and behaving.

The lack of positive male role models is a real problem, and one that should also be addressed at the EU level. In 2025, only 27% of teachers in the EU were

³² J. A. Krems and V. A. Kaufman (2026), 'Friendship: the most overlooked public health asset', Department of Psychology, UCLA, <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/9b27ddd5-2859-43d4-8c43-f9c6b0c38354/Friendship%20-%20The%20Most%20Overlooked%20Public%20Health%20Asset.pdf?t=1764624573&id=4343806>.

male.³³ While education is generally a policy area at the Member State level, the EU has the ability to facilitate and finance trainings for teachers – in this case, male teachers. Giving male teachers or teachers in training the chance to join an EU-funded project focused on gender equality and on how to be a positive role model could have vast impacts on young girls and boys across the continent. Making the project attractive, for example by including reoccurring fully funded study trips, could also incentivise more men to become teachers.

Finally, as proposed by Renew Europe, all EU Member States should make educational establishments phone-free zones. Such a rule could be vital in providing children and adolescents with an offline space for interacting, and it would support their mental well-being during school hours.³⁴

Summary:

- Include learning about relationship-building and emotional intelligence in schools. Make sure that students absorb this information from an early age, through workshops and discussion groups.
- Teach digital literacy as well as gender equality at school, either as a part of curricula or by inviting external speakers who are experts on these topics.
- Ensure that appropriate female and male role models are presented to children from an early age by introducing movies and books that have such characters.
- Create incentives for men to become teachers by organising EU-funded trainings and study trips that feature discussions of good male role models.
- Make schools phone-free spaces.

Redesigning the online space

Many of the solutions so far have centred on preparing young people, through school and family, to develop critical thinking skills. That is necessary, but it places the burden of change on individuals, and largely on those still in education. It does little for the young men and women already immersed in social media platforms and the online world, who will not be affected by age restrictions for online content or a school curriculum. Liberals should therefore also look at the platforms themselves: their rules, their design, and who builds them.

³³ Eurostat (2025), 'The backbone of education: EU's 5.26 million teachers', 2 October, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20251002-1>.

³⁴ Renew Europe (2025), 'Growing up in the algorithm: who's in control?' [policy paper], October (Brussels), https://reneweuropengroup.app.box.com/s/l5d6ut3klk3x9vg0wtvu9vr6pwls26xa?utm_campaign=Renew%20Europe%20demands%20action%20to%20protect%20children%20from%20addictive%20algorithms&utm_medium=CampaignMail&utm_source=Cambuildr.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) gives the EU a strong basis for holding platforms accountable for content moderation, but its interpretation is not settled. Upcoming court cases could narrow or reshape it, so its implementation needs active monitoring and defending rather than being treated as finished business.

Users currently have little control over what they are shown or knowledge about why it is presented to them. Requiring greater feed customisation options and clearer explanations of how recommendation algorithms work would let users push back against the echo chambers that further extreme views on gender. This connects to data ownership; the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) could be used more assertively to give people real agency over the personal data that drive this targeting, curbing platforms' ability to exploit engagement-maximising – and often polarising – content.

Beyond structural fixes, AI-based fact-checking layers, whether built into platforms or offered as browser extensions, could catch and flag divisive or misleading gendered narratives as they spread, rather than relying solely on after-the-fact moderation.

Not all solutions require regulating existing platforms; some involve building better ones. Community-based platforms, designed around users rather than profit-driven engagement, offer a European alternative to the current model. The same logic applies to dating apps – platforms that shift the usual power dynamics (by letting women initiate contact, for example) have been shown to foster more respectful interactions. Limiting the commercial or corporate presence on certain platforms could also reduce the engagement-driven incentives that reward extreme content in the first place.

Finally, the people designing these platforms shape the outcomes. Greater gender parity among the staff at social media and dating companies is likely to produce better moderation policies and safer design choices. Elevating creators who model constructive, balanced discussion, rather than the loudest or most extreme voices, is a smaller but complementary step platforms and public campaigns can take.

Summary:

- Monitor and defend the DSA as court cases progress, and explore verified digital identities to reduce the toxicity driven by anonymity online.
- Push for greater algorithmic transparency and more feed customisation options, and use the GDPR to bolster users' control over their own data.
- Support the development of AI-based fact-checking tools embedded in platforms or available as extensions.

- Back community-owned, non-corporate platform alternatives, and dating apps that redesign power dynamics rather than replicate them.
- Encourage gender balance in the teams that build and moderate these platforms, and elevate constructive voices over extreme ones.

Local communities

Outside schools, it is crucial that local communities all over Europe have a strong and vibrant civil society. Cities should invest in 'third spaces' such as public swimming pools, community gardens, libraries, public gyms, and beaches. These are places where people meet, interact, and connect with each other. Organising sporting or cultural events, music festivals, or celebrations connected to important occasions (such as the country's national day) are all examples of ways to bring people together. Getting people out on the streets to enjoy an event together creates a sense of shared purpose. In the long term, this can help combat prejudice and filter bubbles.

Sports clubs and organisations where young people can pursue their interests and spend their free time are an important cornerstone of civil society. One policy recommendation in this area is supporting more activities in mixed-gender settings. This would increase everyday interaction between young men and women and allow friendships to form around shared interests, which can help prevent gender stereotyping.

As has been stated previously in this paper, people are experiencing rising frustration with digital dating culture. Thus, local communities should provide opportunities to find love in the 'analogue world'. By organising speed dating events or parties where everyone wears a bracelet signalling their civil status (green for single and red for taken), people get to practise their social skills and make connections that transcend the superficial traits guiding interactions on dating apps.

Lastly, at the European Liberal Forum we view the right to a home as a core liberal principle. As we said in our housing study: 'Freedom begins at home'.³⁵ However, many big cities in Europe are currently experiencing housing crises, for various reasons. One thing that could contribute positively both to ameliorating the housing crisis and reducing the gender divide is co-living. When people live together, they learn to be respectful, cooperative, and understanding toward each other. Living with people of different ages, countries, or genders can combat prejudice and increase empathy. Therefore, rather than studio apartments

³⁵ A. Nestoras, M. Schulz, and B. Robitaille (eds.), 'Building Freedom: Liberal Solutions to Europe's Housing Crisis', ELF Study 9, <https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Building-Freedom.pdf>. DOI: 10.53121/ELFS9.

designed for a single occupant, cities should build more multi-bedroom apartments and student dorms with shared common spaces.

Summary:

- Invest in third spaces in the local community and organise festivities and events surrounding important days.
- Encourage sports teams and clubs on the local level to create mixed-gender groups.
- Organise local in-person matchmaking activities, such as speed dating.
- Encourage co-living by building bigger apartments and student dorms in European cities.

Nightlife

After the pandemic, clubs and bars all over Europe have had fewer guests, leading many to close down.³⁶ As the younger generation spends less time at bars and more time on their phones, polarisation is only growing. Cities must start prioritising nightlife, for example by providing financial support for bars and clubs to organise affordable or free social events for residents. Such events do not necessarily have to involve alcohol, as the younger generation reportedly is drinking less. In fact, alcohol-free events for young people (such as sober clubbing) are booming all over the world.³⁷ A city that cares about the social well-being of its residents, as well as their physical health, could support nightclubs' hosting sober parties. Sober clubbing events could attract young people who do not drink alcohol or are worried about their safety in normal clubbing environments, helping them find their way back to the dance floor.

When it comes to safety, cities must invest in measures at bars, clubs, and in their surrounding areas to ensure that people do not stay at home on a Friday night out of concern about safety. In recent years, both nightclubs and cities across Europe have launched programmes in which people can volunteer as 'angels'. The angels aim to create a safe environment by assisting those who need help and making sure that people get home from the bar safely. One example is the 'Night Angels' initiative in Stroud, UK, where volunteers are stationed outside a major nightclub equipped with a range of supplies – 'first aid, AED, period products, phone chargers, anti spiking products, alarms, water, sweets, clothing, blankets, flip flops and more!' – to help create a safe and positive going-out experience.

³⁶ Silver Sun (2025), 'The silent collapse of club culture: why so many venues are disappearing', 31 October, <https://www.silversun.fm/articles/the-silent-collapse-of-club-culturewhy-so-many-venues-are-disappearing>.

³⁷ J. Sykes (2025), 'Bass without the booze: why people are partying sober', CNN, 3 December, <https://edition.cnn.com/health/why-people-are-partying-sober-wellness-spc>

³⁸ Cities should invest in such projects and make sure that the angels get paid for the important work they do.

Countries and cities also need to review their noise regulations. Swedish liberal think tank Timbro argues that Sweden's noise regulations are too restrictive and contribute to the demise of nightlife by forcing clubs to shut down when neighbours complain. An example of good noise regulation can be found in Copenhagen, which uses noise zones that allow louder noise on busy bar streets than in residential areas of the city. In Paris the noise regulation is relative to the surrounding noise in the area, meaning that less noise is allowed in quieter areas and more noise is allowed in areas with more commercial activity or more traffic.³⁹ More European cities should take inspiration from the flexible and adaptive noise regulations of Copenhagen and Paris to ensure that nightlife can continue to thrive.

Summary:

- Make nightlife attractive again so people have places to meet and connect with each other.
- At the city level, support bars and clubs financially and encourage them to host sober clubbing events.
- Prioritise safety in and around bars and clubs, for example by investing in 'angels'.
- Review European cities' noise regulations to assess how they affect bars and clubs. If necessary, change regulations to be more flexible and adaptive.

³⁸ Angel Project UK (n.d.), 'Night Angels working together for a safer community', <https://www.angelprojectuk.org/about-night-angels/>.

³⁹ R. Brattström (2025), 'Stoppa klubbddöden', Timbro, 14 October, <https://timbro.se/staden/stoppa-klubbddoden/>.

References

ALDE Research, 2024–2025.

Angel Project UK (n.d.). 'Night Angels working together for a safer community', <https://www.angelprojectuk.org/about-night-angels/>.

Brattström, R. (2025). 'Stoppa klubbddöden', Timbro, 14 October, <https://timbro.se/staden/stoppa-klubbddoden/>.

Eurobarometer (2025). 'Social Media Survey 2025', European Union, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3592>.

Eurostat (2025). 'Tertiary Education Statistics', European Commission, June, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics#:~:text=Poland%20\(1.7%25\).-,Participation%20in%20tertiary%20education%20by%20sex,all%20of%20the%20EU%20countries](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics#:~:text=Poland%20(1.7%25).-,Participation%20in%20tertiary%20education%20by%20sex,all%20of%20the%20EU%20countries).

Eurostat (2025). 'The backbone of education: EU's 5.26 million teachers', 2 October, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20251002-1>.

Joint Research Centre (JRC) (n.d.). 'The JRC explains: why are children and adolescents vulnerable to social media?', European Commission, https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-explains/why-are-children-and-adolescents-vulnerable-social-media_en.

Joseph, C. (2025). 'Is having a boyfriend embarrassing now?', Vogue, 29 October, <https://www.vogue.com/article/is-having-a-boyfriend-embarrassing-now>.

King's College London (2025). 'Gen Z men and women most divided on gender equality, global study shows', 5 March, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/gen-z-men-and-women-most-divided-on-gender-equality-global-study-shows>.

Krems, J. A. & Kaufman, V. A. (2026). 'Friendship: the most overlooked public health asset', Department of Psychology, UCLA, <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/9b27ddd5-2859-43d4-8c43-f9c6b0c38354/Friendship%20-%20The%20Most%20Overlooked%20Public%20Health%20Asset.pdf?t=1764624573&id=4343806>.

Library of Congress (n.d.). 'Generations', <https://guides.loc.gov/consumer-research/market-segments/generations>.

Maguire, S. (2026). 'Revealed: the new radicalism among young women', New Statesman, 15 April. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/polling/2026/04/revealed-the-new-radicalism-among-young-women>

Maguire, S. (2026). 'Young women are radicalising', New Statesman, 5 January, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2026/01/young-women-are-radicalising>.

McCrea-Hedley, O. (2024). 'When did dating become all about the politics?', Service 95, 8 February, <https://www.service95.com/the-politics-of-dating-apps>.

Merlin Strategy (2026). 'Polling for the New Statesman', 16 April, <https://www.merlinstrategy.com/recent-polling>.

Meszaros, J. (2025). 'From "mail-order brides" to "passport bros": the international dating industry often sells traditional gender roles', The Conversation, 21 November <https://theconversation.com/from-mail-order-brides-to-passport-bros-the-international-dating-industry-often-sells-traditional-gender-roles-268616>.

Morrish, N., Spencer, A. & Medina-Lara, A. (2025). 'How Loneliness Relates to Health, Wellbeing, Quality of Life, and Healthcare Resource Utilisation and Costs across Multiple Age Groups in the UK'. PLOS ONE, 20(9), e0327671. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0327671>.

Movember Institute of Men's Health (2025). 'Young men's health in a digital world' [report], <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/d6x1mtv1/mo-com-production/e1054b901ac235e16f177a2bca8ee760fb8e6a19.pdf>.

Nestoras, A., Schulz, M., & Robitaille, B. (eds.). 'Building Freedom: Liberal Solutions to Europe's Housing Crisis'. ELF Study 9, <https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Building-Freedom.pdf>. DOI: 10.53121/ELFS9.

Newkey-Burden, C. (2026). 'What Is the femosphere?', The Week, April, <https://theweek.com/politics/what-is-the-femosphere>.

Peterson, D., Rooduijn, M., Hopp, F.-R., Schumacher, G., & Bakker, B.-N. (2025). 'Loneliness Is Positively Associated with Populist Radical Right Support'. Social Science & Medicine, 366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.117676>.

Pronk, T. M., & Denissen, J. J. A. (2020). 'A Rejection Mind-Set: Choice Overload in Online Dating'. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 11(3), 388–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619866189>.

Renew Europe (2025). 'Growing up in the algorithm: who's in control?' [policy paper], October (Brussels), https://reneweuropengroup.app.box.com/s/l5d6ut3klk3x9vg0wtvu9vr6pwls26xa?utm_campaign=Renew%20Europe%20demands%20action%20to%20protect%20children%20from%20addictive%20algorithms&utm_medium=CampaignMail&utm_source=Cambuildr.

Silver Sun (2025). 'The silent collapse of club culture: why so many venues are disappearing', 31 October, <https://www.silversun.fm/articles/the-silent-collapse-of-club-culturewhy-so-many-venues-are-disappearing>.

StudyFinds (2025). 'Men keep swiping out of their league on dating apps, and research shows it rarely works', 23 July, <https://studyfinds.org/men-keep-swiping-out-of-their-league-on-dating-apps/>.

Sykes, J. (2025). 'Bass without the booze: why people are partying sober', CNN, 3 December, <https://edition.cnn.com/health/why-people-are-partying-sober-wellness-spc>.

Tamasco, M. (2025). 'Young men shifting to political right has caused women to distrust dating apps, says Atlantic writer', New York Post, 21 August, <https://nypost.com/2025/08/21/media/young-men-shifting-to-political-right-has-caused-women-to-distrust-dating-apps-says-atlantic-writer/>.

Techopedia (2024). 'Filter bubble', 11 June, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/28556/filter-bubble>.

The Economist (2025). 'The rise of singlehood is reshaping the world', 6 November, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/11/06/the-rise-of-singlehood-is-reshaping-the-world?utm_campaign=editorial-social&utm_content=discovery.content&utm_medium=social-media.content.np&utm_source=linkedin.

UN Women (2025). 'How to counter the manosphere's toxic influence', 15 May, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-counter-the-manospheres-toxic-influence>

UN Women (2025). 'How to talk to kids about gender equality and stereotypes', 13 May, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-gender-equality-and-stereotypes>.

UN Women (2025). 'What is the manosphere and why should we care?', 15 May, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-should-we-care>.

Author bio

Lisa Lundgren is a Policy and Research Fellow at the European Liberal Forum. Previously, she has worked in migration policy and opinion research at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies and in outreach and inter-institutional relations for the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament.

About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

A liberal future in a united Europe

liberalforum.eu

 /europeanliberalforum

 /europeanliberalforum

 @eurliberalforum

 @eurliberalforum.bsky.social

 eurliberalforum

DOI: 10.53121/ELFPP42

ISSN 2736-5816



Graphic Design: Altaïs

Copyright 2026 / European Liberal Forum EUPF.

This publication received financial support from the European Parliament.
The European Parliament is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.