

POLICY BRIEF

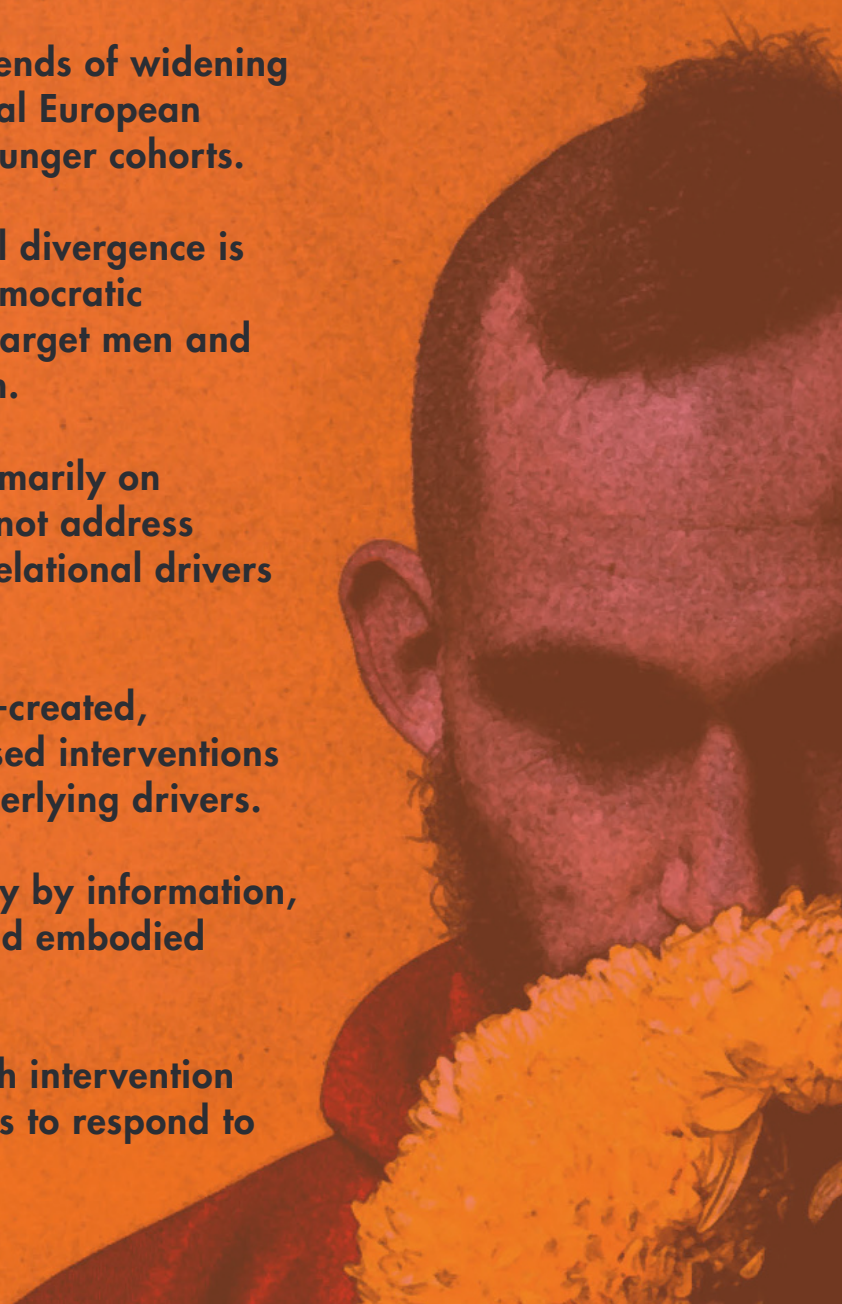
DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE: NEW TOOLS TO COUNTER GENDERED RADICALISATION



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Highlights

- New survey data show that countries with more progressive overall masculinity norms also have the largest gender gaps between young men and women.
- These patterns mirror broader trends of widening gender voting gaps across several European countries, particularly among younger cohorts.
- The intensified gendered political divergence is spurred by the spread of anti-democratic narratives in online spaces that target men and shape political identity formation.
- Current policy responses rely primarily on information-based tools that do not address emotional, identity-based, and relational drivers of radicalisation.
- MEN4DEM demonstrates how co-created, experiential, and community-based interventions can effectively engage these underlying drivers.
- Attitude change is driven not only by information, but by reflection, recognition, and embodied experience.
- Policymakers should expand both intervention models and evidence frameworks to respond to current challenges.



Why this matters now

With major elections approaching, Europe is entering a period of intense political participation and mobilization. There are signs of increasing political polarisation and more visible authoritarian-leaning narratives. Online ecosystems—such as the manosphere—circulate narratives that frame democratic institutions and gender equality as threats. The MEN4DEM [theory-in-action report](#) reviews how gender has become a central fault line in these dynamics. New [survey data](#) from MEN4DEM show that European countries with more progressive overall masculinity norms also have the largest gender gaps between young men and women, mirroring widening gender voting gaps among first-time voters. These developments are not new, but are intensifying and becoming more politically consequential.

Gender equality policy tends to focus on improving the situation for women. Still, under these conditions, it also needs to include a focus on men and masculinities, particularly young men. Current responses remain focused on information campaigns and regulation of online spaces, although radicalization processes are largely shaped by emotions, identity, and lived experience.

As a result, key drivers—such as perceived exclusion and discrimination, lack of recognition, and identity-based grievances—are actively exploited by actors seeking to undermine democratic processes, even as they remain insufficiently addressed in pro-democratic interventions. Boosting societal resilience and citizens' engagement is a priority for the [European Democracy Shield](#) and requires addressing the affective and identity-based foundations of democratic attachment.



Evidence and Insights

MEN4DEM is a Horizon Europe-funded research project that brings together the knowledge of academics, artists, and activists to co-create and test interventions that engage men in strengthening democratic resilience. We conducted a systematic, evidence-based review of intervention effectiveness and synthesized these scientific findings with best practices from MenEngage Europe. We conclude that effective interventions are participatory, immersive, and long-term. The co-creation of a safe research ethics framework extends the participatory approach to researcher safety and well-being.

Participatory: Co-creation produces transformative effects

Co-creation between academia, artists, and activists is challenging but rewarding. Combining different types of knowledge requires time, patience, and communication. The impact includes changes in participants' personal and professional practices, diffusion of insights across organizations and networks, stronger and more sustained collaboration, contextual adaptation, and improved well-being and reflexivity within research processes.



LARP Testing and Training, 2026

Immersive: Embodied experience enables deeper engagement

Interventions such as live-action role play (LARP) are not merely artistic tools but structured social laboratories. They enable participants to experience and critically analyze the mechanisms of belonging, power, grievance, and identity that underpin radicalization processes. MEN4DEM has developed a new scripted Nordic LARP to encourage and explore embodied, immersive experiences.

Long-term: Reflection is a key mechanism of change

Effective interventions challenge binary and rigid thinking and promote more complex understandings. For instance, our survey data show that support for anti-democratic masculinity cannot be reduced to a simple left-right divide. MEN4DEM now focuses on how support for traditional masculinity roles intersects with challenges to democratic principles. We have adapted the research design and treat reflection not as a by-product, but as a central source of evidence and impact. Structured follow-up reflections after the LARP reveal individual experiences, and allow for reassessing assumptions, shifting attitudes, and processing emotions and recognition.

OUR NEW FORMAT: A SCRIPTED NORDIC LARP

Nordic LARP is an immersive, participatory form of live-action role-play rooted in experiential and embodied practice, where participants do not only perform a role but also undergo shifts in perspective, behaviour or awareness.

By temporarily stepping into another person's shoes, participants experience situations and emotions that **challenge their own values, assumptions and beliefs**.

More than improvisation, our scripted Nordic LARP is a guided experience in which **each character carries a clear, emotional arc**. The role-play invites both experienced LARPer and first-time players into a deeply accessible and layered form of play.

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Policy Recommendations

1. Integrate participatory interventions into policy toolkits

- Embed co-created, embodied approaches (e.g. role-play, theatre, facilitated reflection) in education, youth work, and community-based democracy programmes.
- Strive to move beyond polarising “us-and-them” narratives and avoid simplified binaries: allow for complexity and critical self-reflection.

Participatory, immersive methods enable individuals to experience different perspectives and reflect on their own attitudes, reaching mechanisms that information-based tools do not.

2. Broaden evidence standards in policy frameworks

- Recognise qualitative, participatory, and experience-based evidence as valid inputs in EU and national funding and evaluation systems.
- Adjust funding and assessment criteria to better accommodate mixed-method, iterative, and process-oriented designs.

Key mechanisms of change—such as trust, recognition, and self-reflection—are not adequately captured through statistical indicators alone.

3. Institutionalise co-creation across policy cycles

- Encourage structured collaboration among researchers, civil society organisations, practitioners, and cultural actors from the earliest stages of program design.
- Move co-creation upstream to shape problem definition and intervention logic, rather than limiting it to implementation.

Early-stage co-creation improves contextual fit, intervention quality, and uptake across local, national and EU-level programmes.



3. Address relational drivers of radicalisation

- Develop policy measures that explicitly target social belonging, recognition, and inclusion, including constructive and plural masculinities.
- Integrate these dimensions into existing frameworks on education, mental health, youth policy, and social inclusion.

This reflects evidence that radicalisation and democratic disengagement are shaped not only by ideology or exposure to information, but also by perceived exclusion and status insecurity.

4. Support adaptive and iterative programme governance

- Allow funded interventions to evolve through learning, feedback, and context-specific adjustment.
- Iterative program designs allowing for continuous reflection require long-term support

Flexibility is a condition for innovation in co-creative approaches and for responding to rapidly shifting social and digital dynamics.

5. Strengthen dialogical and emotionally engaging science communication

- Support two-way, participatory formats that combine research dissemination with dialogue, including interactive and arts-based approaches.
- Move beyond one-directional communication models towards engagement that builds trust and shared interpretation.

Emotionally resonant communication improves uptake, comprehension, and democratic engagement, particularly among groups who are otherwise disengaged from institutional channels.

MEN4DEM Working Papers

Anlar, B. and L. Mügge. (2025) Safe research ethics framework. MEN4DEM Working Paper 4, August 2025.

Besta, T., M. Nowacka, M. Iwanowska, A. Gupta. (2025) Countering anti-democratic masculinities: State of the art of evidence-based interventions. MEN4DEM Working Paper 2, June 2025.

Bjarnegård, E. and L. Mügge. (2025) (Anti)democratic masculinities theory in action: Transdisciplinary reflections and co-creation. MEN4DEM Working Paper 1, April 2025.

Schaaf, H. and J. Mars. (2025) Democratic masculinities best practices report: Expert organizations' interventions and key mechanisms of change. MEN4DEM Working Paper 3, July 2025.

Tomatis, F. and V. Lomazzi (2025) European contexts of socialization into anti-democratic masculinities. MEN4DEM Working Paper 5, December 2025.

Additional Resources

Milosav, Đ., Dickson, Z., Hobolt, S. B., Klüver, H., Kuhn, T., & Rodon, T. (2026). The youth gender gap in support for the far right. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 33(2), 444–468.

Murray, R. and E. Bjarnegård. (2024) Bringing men and masculinities into political science. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 7(3): 308-325.

Off, G., Alexander, A., & Charron, N. (2025). Is there a gender youth gap in far-right voting and cultural attitudes?. *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (published online ahead of print 2025).

Rodriguez Müller, A.P., Martin Bosch, J., Hernández Quirós, L., Smith, R.S. and Schade, S. (2025) Supporting EU policy implementation with co-creation: the case of the Interoperable Europe Act. *Science for Policy Brief*, European Commission, Seville, JRC139808.

Schumann, K., Zaki, J., & Dweck, C. S. (2022). Using performance art to promote intergroup prosociality by cultivating the belief that empathy is unlimited. *Nature Communications*, 13, Article 7710.

For more information on MEN4DEM, please visit our website:
www.men4dem.eu