



PCUN Supports the Sustainable Development Goals

Rising political divides among Gen-Z worldwide - particularly between genders - reflect intersecting forces: economic precarity, political disillusionment, challenges around masculine identity and connection, and online echo chambers. As young people seek meaning and direction, attention-driven algorithms and dwindling opportunities for low-risk learning deepen polarization. Inclusive, global efforts are needed to rebuild connection and dialogue.

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Indeed, one study found that only 31% of Gen Z feel comfortable financially, and 52% are very or extremely worried about not having enough money (Ernst & Young, 2023). The same study reported that 44% of participants ranked “making a lot of money” as the first or second most important attribute of a job. Gen Z anxiety about money is not unfounded, for example, the average Gen Z worker needs to save for 14 years to afford a down payment on a house, which is nearly twice as long as Baby Boomers (Hawkins, 2024). This economic precarity has profoundly impacted the job market, and what types of jobs are deemed desirable. The CFA Institute reported finance and tech as being seen as the most valuable degrees, with humanities and the arts seen as least valuable. One reason for this is the financial viability: finance is considered the most financially stable career (CFA Institute, 2023). Following the global financial crisis in 2008 funding for humanities based fields plummeted as enrollment in bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in the humanities decreased by 5%, 11%, and 9% (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021). For many men, who perhaps feel pressure to be the ‘breadwinner,’ a humanities degree and career appear undesirable. Indeed, though humanities majors are declining all around, they are declining particularly for men: as of 2022 women received 63% of all humanities degrees.

The cultural shift among Gen Z towards valuing STEM over humanities could be one reason for the unstable political landscape, and increasing polarization between men and women. Humanities fields emphasize training and education in: critical thinking skills, cultural understanding, ethical leadership, adaptability and resilience, historical perspective, interdisciplinary insights, and human centered solutions, skills that are vital for participating in political discussion (Munoz, 2024). Many, particularly Gen Z men, view education only as a path to a well paying job; education for the sake of education is going out of style. This may especially impact young men who feel pressure to be the primary breadwinners of their families, or be seen as failures. This economic pressure worldwide reduces learning for learning’s sake, limiting open, relaxed discussion - skills critical to learning about and practicing critical thinking and engaging in meaningful political discussion across differences (Paudel, 2017).

Socialization to Politics through Digital Media

Social media, online communities, and emerging trends in artificial intelligence (AI) are critical forces shaping the gendered polarization evident in Gen Z political culture. Digital life contributes to this divide through algorithmic radicalization, a process in which platforms either reinforce individuals’ existing beliefs or confront them with inflammatory content that provokes antagonism (Shin & Jitkajornwanich, 2024). One particularly gendered manifestation of this is the rise of the “manosphere,” which is a loosely connected group of online spaces where young men, often feeling isolated or overlooked, seek out community, mentorship, and role models. These forums frequently promote hypermasculinity, grievance-based identity, and anti-feminist rhetoric.

Gender, Politics, and the "Crisis of Masculinity"

Understanding young men’s voting behavior requires examining the social, historical, and ideological forces at play in shaping this divergence. The pattern has renewed decades-long debates on the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Horrocks, 1994), which is often discussed in relation to immense rates of global gender-based violence. While scholars debate whether the term “crisis” is appropriate (Connell, 1995), the global trends remain concerning—and they are not only reflective of the impact on women and girls. Research shows that men’s acceptance of restrictive masculine norms makes them increasingly vulnerable to both perpetrating and being subjected to violence, as well as to poor mental health and suicidal ideation (Reidy et al, 2014). These restrictive norms together construct ‘hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Hill et al, 2020), or the ‘man box’ (Irvine & Flood, 2018).

hooks advocates for naming these patterns as the “crisis of patriarchal masculinity” (hooks, 2004) to reveal that it is not masculinity itself that causes harm, but its forms that operate to uphold patriarchal systems. Young men’s voting behavior can be seen as a part of “backlash” against progressive movements (Faludi, 1991), particularly because many young men and conservative proponents blame feminism for ‘going too far’ and leading to young men’s loss of purpose and identity (Jordan & Chandler, 2019).

They are reacting to a misreading of feminism as a hateful, punitive approach to men, but as argued by hooks, true feminism operates with a love ethic and is for all people (hooks, 2004). In an effort to address division and backlash, some transnational networks are working to engage men and boys in feminist-informed, gender-transformative approaches, which is expanded upon in “Resources and Recommendations.”

Economic Precarity and Pressures Toward Conservatism

One important reason why Gen Z is experiencing political divergence is economic precarity, particularly for children and young adults. For many young people, a defining event in their childhood was the 2008 financial crisis that saw many families endure serious economic hardship. Additionally, rising inflation and economic instability has prompted many young voters to feel financially insecure.

Importantly, many young men are drawn in not out of malice but because they feel they have nowhere else to go for emotional connection and meaning. In contrast, online spaces for women and gender nonbinary individuals are often designed to be cooperative, emotionally supportive, and focused on collective action rather than identity affirmation alone. These spaces foster more inclusive and collaborative norms, which can act as a buffer against polarization. However, digital environments still intensify homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), i.e., the tendency to connect with those who are similar, which contributes to practices like “defriending” or “canceling” those with dissenting views. These behaviors can entrench ideological silos and limit opportunities for cross-group understanding.

Recommendations

1. Promote Gender-Inclusive Spaces for Mental Health

Consistent with SDG5 (Gender Equality), Supporting gender-inclusive spaces - especially men’s mental health organizations and gender-transformative initiatives - is key to addressing the root causes of polarization. These spaces offer young men alternatives to toxic masculinity by providing positive role models, community, and resources for emotional well-being and suicide prevention. Networks like MenEngage Alliance and Equimundo harness global research and grassroots efforts to challenge patriarchal norms and hegemonic masculinities. Through workshops, campaigns, and parenting programs, they foster healthy masculinities that emphasize empathy, equity, and respect. Although these initiatives do not directly aim to influence voting behavior, they address the social forces driving alienation and polarization. By creating environments for connection, reflection, and growth, they reduce feelings of isolation and resentment, opening pathways toward more inclusive political participation across genders.

2. Connect Youth Globally Through Economic Forums

Leveraging pre-existing UN NGOs and international forums focused on economic stabilization offers a powerful way to address financial precarity among Gen Z globally. Aligned with SDG17 (Partnerships), connecting young people across countries and socioeconomic backgrounds fosters transnational solidarity and cross-cultural understanding. These platforms can illuminate shared challenges such as inflation, job insecurity, and educational barriers, which often underlie political polarization and gendered divides. By creating global networks for dialogue and joint action, young people develop a broader perspective that transcends local or national narratives. This helps dilute divisive rhetoric and strengthens collective resilience. Furthermore, engaging youth in discussions about economic justice and policy solutions empowers them to advocate for systemic change, promoting a more equitable and inclusive future.

3. Empower Youth Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement

In line with SDG10 (Reducing Inequalities), mobilizing young people as active stakeholders in political and social processes is crucial to bridging gendered divides.

When youth come together in leadership organizations, they gain a clearer sense of ownership and control over issues that affect their lives. This empowerment fosters political efficacy and encourages collaborative problem-solving, which can reduce polarization by shifting focus from adversarial conflict to shared goals. Youth-led initiatives also provide safe spaces for dialogue, helping young men and women to challenge restrictive norms around masculinity and femininity in constructive ways. By highlighting their stake in policy and community outcomes, these efforts cultivate a sense of agency and responsibility that counters disillusionment and apathy, making political engagement more inclusive and resilient.

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