

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH VALUES-BASED COMMUNICATION



A PRACTICAL GUIDE
to deflect anti-gender rhetoric

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Advancing gender equality through values-based communication

A practical guide for authorities, communicators, and civil society
to deflect anti-gender rhetoric

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Introduction

Across Europe, democratic backsliding is a growing concern. Rhetoric questioning gender equality has become one of the tools used to fuel mistrust in institutions, to weaken international commitments, and to feed polarisation in our societies. This makes the defence and advancement of equality both a fundamental matter of rights and an urgent democratic imperative. The process leading to a Council of Europe [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#), provides a well-timed opportunity to reinforce this link and to ensure that gender equality is recognised as a cornerstone of democratic resilience.

The purpose of this Guide is to support member states' governments, Council of Europe bodies, civil society organisations and interested stakeholders in strengthening public support for gender equality and in promoting **constructive, values-based narratives** that place gender equality at the heart of democratic life. This fits within the Council of Europe's broader mission to protect democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Why focus on values and narratives? Because stories are how people make sense of the world and their place in it. Stories express the values we share, what we care about, what we believe is right, and what feels possible. When our messages connect to these shared values through our narratives and the stories we tell, they become more relatable and powerful. When used well, values-based narratives open dialogue, reduce defensiveness, and allow constructive messages to be heard above the noise of polarising or inflammatory rhetoric. They create the conditions for facts and policies to take root. Grounding communication in shared values builds trust and invites more people into the "story of gender equality".

This Guide brings together lessons from behavioural science, framing research, as well as practical experience. Its aim is to share insights and examples of how values-based narratives can be applied in practice, and to help users ask the right questions when developing messages for different audiences.

The document is organised in two parts. **Section One** sets out seven key lessons, the foundations of values-based communication and why framing matters. These lessons are drawn from research, international practice, and exchanges within the [Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission](#) (GEC). **Section Two** shows how these lessons can be applied in practice, with scenarios and examples that illustrate how different audiences can be reached. Together, they are intended as a guide to help the Council of Europe, its member states and civil society reflect, adapt, and strengthen their narratives in ways that are more understanding of the concerns of differing audiences and that resonate more widely. The aim is to better communicate the benefits - for society as a whole - of policies in support of gender equality and women's rights. **Section Three** explores how values-based communication can be used to highlight the link between gender equality and democracy.

This Guide was developed by the GEC¹ based on its deliberations in plenary and within a dedicated working group supported by consultants with expertise in strategic communications and gender equality. The GEC discussed and adopted the document at its plenary session in November 2025. The Guide was developed pursuant to the GEC's terms of reference, mandated by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers to respond to certain challenges identified in the [Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029](#).

1. GEC(2025)31 Add5

SECTION 1

How to apply values-based communication: seven key lessons

This section sets out seven key lessons on how values-based framing can strengthen communication. It draws on evidence from behavioural science and examples to show why facts alone rarely shift opinions, and how the way we frame issues profoundly shapes what people see as the problem and the solution. The lessons highlight the importance of choosing frames deliberately, grounding messages in shared values, reaching the “movable middle” (the audiences who may not yet have a fixed position and are more receptive to different ways of understanding an issue), reclaiming the collective “we”, telling stories that connect, and rooting communication in shared references. Together, these lessons offer tools to make communication on gender equality clearer, stronger and more effective.



Lesson 1: Always frame your communication

Human beings are innately irrational

We often assume that people make decisions by calmly weighing up facts, but behavioural science shows otherwise. The majority of what shapes our choices happens unconsciously. The way information is presented can lead to very different conclusions, even when the facts are identical.

Facts on their own rarely change minds. People tend to **filter information through their existing ways of viewing the world**, using the facts that fit to reinforce what they already believe, and discarding the rest. When facts directly contradict those beliefs, they can provoke defensiveness resulting in people holding on to their original position even more strongly. This can even result in a “backfire effect” and can harden opposition if facts are not woven into a broader story that connects with people’s values and experiences.



Consider this example: In a study at Harvard Medical School, two groups of students were given the same statistics about a surgical procedure and were asked to decide whether they would operate or not. However, the information was framed differently for each group:

- 👉 “The surgery has a 90% **survival** rate.”
- 👉 “The surgery has a 10% **mortality** rate.”

84% of those hearing “survival rate” said they would operate, compared with only 50% in the “mortality rate” group. The figures mean the exact same thing, yet how the information was **framed** (using the survival frame versus the mortality frame) was the determining factor of how the information was interpreted.²

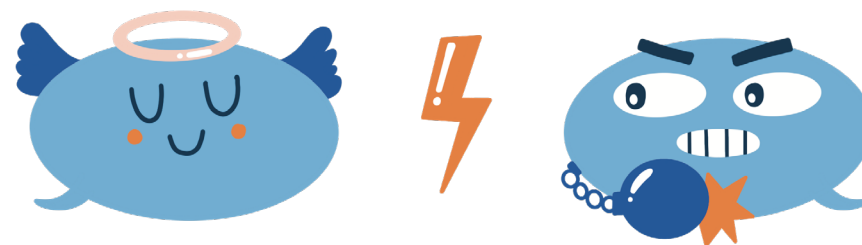
2. McNeil, Barbara J., Stephen G. Pauker, Harold C. Sox Jr., and Amos Tversky. “On the Elicitation of Preferences for Alternative Therapies” *New England Journal of Medicine* 306, no. 21 (May 27, 1982): 1259–62.

Frames shape how we think about an issue - often without us realising



Words are never neutral. They bring with them whole packages of meaning that shape public understanding. For example, when we hear **burden**, we think of something heavy and unpleasant. When we hear **relief**, we feel that something bad has been lifted. By definition, whatever we are relieved from must be negative.

Now consider how often these words are paired with taxation: tax **burden** and tax **relief**. Both describe the same reality, but the frame signals how we should feel about the issue. Burden suggests taxes are a weight causing hardship and pain, while relief casts a tax cut as the removal of such pain. Hence tax is broadly framed in our minds as ‘bad’, while its removal is ‘good’.



To take another example: For a long time, the most common term to describe what is happening to our environment has been climate **change**. But change, in itself, is neutral. It can be good or bad, fast or slow, positive or negative. It does not necessarily sound urgent or worthy of much action. Another widely used term has been global **warming**. But “warm” is a pleasant word, associated with comfort and holidays, not catastrophe. Consider, by contrast, how it feels when we talk about climate **crisis**, climate **breakdown** or global **overheating**. These words bring a much stronger sense of threat and urgency to do something.





These examples show how frames are built from the **words that most often appear in combination with an idea**. Once established, these pairings guide what people think is at stake and what kind of action feels right. That is also why it is important not to emphasise pairings that reinforce negative or unhelpful associations.

Never repeat and simply negate harmful frames - replace them instead

One of the golden rules of framing is not to repeat the frame you want to change. “Myth-busting” often backfires by reinforcing the very idea you want to move away from. So, rather than saying “gender equality **is not** a niche issue,” say “gender equality **is central** to a fair and thriving society.” Instead of “gender equality doesn’t just benefit women,” say “gender equality benefits everyone by creating stronger, fairer communities.” In this way, you replace a myth rather than unintentionally strengthening it.



Metaphors are powerful frames

Frames are not only created by individual words. They can also be built through metaphors, which map a whole set of associations from one idea onto another. This makes them especially powerful in shaping how we think and feel.

One striking example comes from a study conducted by Stanford University. Two focus groups were given exactly the same presentation on crime statistics in a fictional US city. The only difference in the presentation was the introduction, where two different metaphors were used:

 Crime is a **beast** ravaging the city of Addison.

 Crime is a **virus** ravaging the city of Addison.

When crime was described as a **beast** preying on a city, participants called for tougher policing and harsher punishments. When the same statistics were described to the second group as a **virus** infecting a city, participants were more likely to suggest education, prevention and reform.³



3. Thibodeau, P. H., & Boroditsky, L. (2011). “[Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning](#)” PLoS ONE, 6(2): e16782.

Just as with the Harvard experiment on surgery mentioned above, **the data was identical**. What changed was the frame - the metaphor - and with it the kind of solutions that occurred naturally to the audience.

Let’s think about some of the metaphors that are used to describe gender inequality in the workplace, for example, the **sticky floor** and the **glass ceiling**.



The **sticky floor** metaphor makes us think of being held down or held back from the outset. Sticky evokes something messy, hard and unpleasant to move through, while the floor signals the lowest level of a system. Together, the metaphor frames women as stuck in place by forces beyond their control. It leads us to see the problem as fundamental, requiring broad solutions to prevent people being held at the bottom and to ensure that all have the chance to move ahead.

By contrast, the more commonly used **glass ceiling** metaphor makes us think of a final barrier to the highest levels of power. The ceiling is the top of a hierarchy, a visible goal, while the glass is transparent: you can see the position but cannot reach it. This framing directs attention to discrimination at the top, encouraging solutions that challenge corporate bias and that break down barriers to leadership. But it also nudges us toward picturing “exceptional” women smashing through. If you want to speak to the everyday reality of most working women, it might be a less useful frame than the one about the sticky floor.

In short, the metaphors we use do matter: they highlight different realities and direct attention towards different solutions, which is why we must be **intentional** about where we want the focus to be.

These findings underline a simple truth: facts do not land in a vacuum in people’s minds. They are always filtered through frames, cues and pre-existing associations.



Lesson 2: Ground your message in values

We have seen how frames and metaphors shape the way people think. But why do different audiences respond so differently to the same message? The answer lies in **values**. When we communicate, we are always appealing to values, whether we do so intentionally or not.

Values are the deep principles that guide what people see as important. Examples of guiding values are freedom, equality, care, responsibility or respect. They help us decide what feels right or what is worth fighting for.

When people make decisions, they do so through the lens of their values. For one person, the first question they might ask themselves – consciously or not – before deciding something, is whether it is **safe**; for another, whether it is **fair**; for someone else, whether it is **kind** or **respectful**. Because people prioritise different values, they can judge the same situation in very different ways. Sometimes those values align, and sometimes they even come into conflict. For example, the value of care might lead someone to want to help a stranger who asks for help, while the value of safety might hold them back for fear of putting themselves at risk.

Surveys conducted with over 60,000 people across 64 countries found that values can essentially be categorised into **ten basic sets of values which are shared across most cultures**: self-direction, universalism, stimulation, benevolence, hedonism, conformity, achievement, tradition, power, security.⁴

While each of us holds all of these values to some degree, we prioritise them differently depending on our life experience, culture and context. There is no right or wrong set of values, but the way we rank them shapes how we see the world and how we respond to messages. This is why a single message can resonate deeply with one audience and fall flat, or even backfire, with another.

Understanding this shared but differently weighted spectrum of values is the foundation for thinking about how we communicate. And within it, focusing on people's deepest held values, those they instinctively call upon to decide what is right and what is wrong, is the key to building connection.



Anchoring messages in deeper values

The most effective messages connect with people's deepest held values. It is therefore important to distinguish between two types of values:



INTRINSIC (principled, or moral) **VALUES** – valued for their own sake, e.g. justice, fairness, care.



EXTRINSIC (transactional) **VALUES** such as power and achievement – valued for what they bring in return.

Extrinsic, transactional appeals can sound practical in the short term, but they rarely build lasting support. Intrinsic, principled values connect to people's core beliefs about what is right and what is wrong, thus anchoring stronger, longer-term commitment.

Across many contexts, **three intrinsic, principled values** consistently resonate:



FREEDOM
the ability to choose
one's path



JUSTICE
fairness and equality



CARE
protecting others
from harm and
ensuring dignity

For example, consider the different motivations underpinning why people support girls' education:

- Education allows girls to grow, make their own choices, and fulfil their potential. (**Freedom**)
- Girls should have the same chances in life as boys. (**Fairness/Equality**)
- Education ensures women have financial security and are not left destitute if a husband abandons them. (**Care/Protection**)

This demonstrates how the same issue, framed through the entry point of three different values, will lead three different people/audiences to engage.

These values are the ones likely to resonate. However, which value you choose as a basis to frame your message will depend on whom you need to reach.

4. Schwartz, S. H. (2012): [An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values](#). Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, Vol. 2, No. 1.



Lesson 3: Frame through shared values that resonate with the “middle ground”

When seeking to build support for an issue, it is rarely productive to focus on those who are already firmly with you, or to try to appeal to those firmly against you. The greatest potential for progress often lies in the space in between, the so-called “**middle ground**” or “**movable middle**”. As with any audience, the choice of frame will make a difference in how the message lands, but with the movable middle the chances of success and the potential returns are greatest. By connecting to the values that resonate most strongly with them, the message can land in a way which is **more effective and convincing for them**.



Everyone holds the same broad set of values, but in different proportions. Some people place greater emphasis on security, others on equality, others on freedom. None of these values is “better” or “worse” - they are simply **different priorities**. Understanding this is crucial to how we communicate, and to understanding how different values can serve to frame our messages effectively. As we saw above with the messages on girls’ education, the same essential idea can be framed in different ways depending on which values matter most to the audience you wish to reach.



For audiences whose values are strongly rooted in **tradition and duty** (where security, stability, and hierarchical relationships are important), a **protection** frame is often the most compelling. It emphasises safeguarding people from harm and upholding responsibilities within the community.



For audiences whose values centre more on **self-direction and autonomy**, a **freedom-from-coercion** frame connects more strongly. It stresses the individual’s ability to make their own decision without interference.



For audiences whose values emphasise **universalism and equality**, a **rights and choice** frame is effective. It highlights fairness and equal treatment.

Message testing on reproductive rights demonstrated this clearly.⁵ Parliamentarians were asked to agree or not with the following statements (placed separately within a longer survey):



“A woman should have the right to decide whether to continue with a pregnancy.”



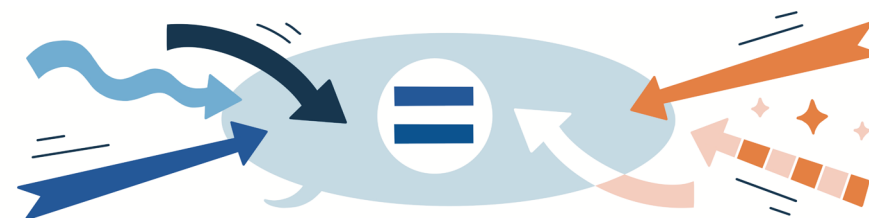
“A woman should not be coerced into continuing a pregnancy against her will.”

Both conveyed the same core idea, yet support varied depending on value orientation. Among parliamentarians from political parties with a leaning towards libertarian principles, support was substantially higher for the **freedom-from-coercion** wording than for the **right-to-decide** wording.

The example shows how the same principle can be framed through different value entry points. The key is to choose the one that connects most directly to the audience you wish to reach.

Stay authentic - frame on values that are shared

Different people weigh the importance of values differently, but that doesn’t mean other values do not matter as well. For example, the **main** driving force for many who care about gender equality may be to ensure that their daughters – or indeed all girls – have the same rights and chances as their sons – or indeed all boys (justice/equality). For others, ensuring their daughters are protected will be their most important concern. However, people whose **first** concern is equality will also want to protect children from harm (protection/care).



Recognizing these converging, overlapping concerns helps build connections without losing sight of what matters most to each group. The key is to use the value connections to reach across differences while staying true to the core values shared by those who already strongly believe in the importance of gender equality. **Authenticity builds trust and consistency over time.**

⁵. Message testing conducted by the International Planned Parenthood, European Network



Certain values have a **bridging quality**: they can connect people who hold quite different worldviews.



Care can link people who emphasise duty, responsibility, and tradition with those whose values centre on equality and universalism. In other words, it bridges between tradition-oriented views and those that stress fairness and solidarity.



Freedom often resonates across people who care about rights and social choice and those who emphasise personal autonomy and independence. It can therefore appeal both to those motivated by progressive views of social inclusion and to those motivated by more neo-liberal concerns of individual liberty and limited external constraint.



Protection connects people who focus on fairness and equality with those who are primarily concerned with the security and safety of their communities. In this way, it can bring together progressive concerns for justice with more conservative concerns for order and stability.

While principled appeals provide the strongest foundation, this does not mean that other considerations are irrelevant. Policy- and decision-makers often also need to weigh practical factors, such as cost, efficiency or measurable outcomes. The key is **sequencing**.



For example, a message on gender equality for an audience holding strong values of fairness could begin by affirming core principles: "Women and men deserve the same rights, the same opportunities, and the same respect. Equality is a matter of fairness and justice."

Only after this values frame is established would the message introduce practical considerations: "When societies ensure equal participation, they also benefit from higher productivity, stronger economic growth, and more effective use of talent."

When we find the values we share and we speak through that prism, every message becomes clearer, stronger and more resonant.

Lesson 4: Reclaim the collective "we"

In today's hyper-polarised world, many issues are framed as zero-sum – i.e. suggesting that what benefits one group invariably disadvantages another. Even well-intentioned messaging can reinforce "otherism," making people think or feel "That's someone else's problem, not mine." This dynamic makes it harder to see the needs and interests we share, and it prevents us from recognising issues and their root causes as common challenges that require collective solutions.

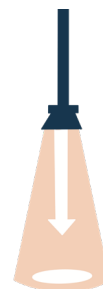
SYMPATHY VS. EMPATHY VS. COLLECTIVE RESONANCE

Sympathy offers a detached pity. It says, "I feel bad for you", but still creates distance.

Empathy brings us closer emotionally - we feel with someone. That's stronger, but it is still rooted in individual experience.

Collective resonance. What can better help move us in polarised contexts is the sense that "we are in this together," grounded in our shared values, risks, and responsibilities.

Research shows that messaging which uses the **collective "we"** can foster a shared identity rather than deepen divisions.⁶



Consider how conversations about gender equality are often constructed. When issues are presented as "women's issues" the messaging can unintentionally signal that only women should care. That framing risks alienating people who don't see it as relevant to them, limiting broader support for systemic solutions. However, if you can present a problem **beyond its effects on one group** – even when these may be disproportionate - it can engage many more people with the story and with finding solutions.



An example of how reframing can broaden engagement would be to link the issue of femicides beyond gender-based violence, to highlight connections with economic precarity, care work and social inequality. By linking violence against women to the wider functioning of communities and economies, gender equality can be framed as a collective concern rather than a "women's issue" alone. This broader framing can help mobilise broader support across sectors, showing how anchoring an issue in a larger "we" can generate wider **social resonance** and drive **systemic change**.

6. Frameworks Institute, "[Fast Frames – Mindsets and Movements: Otherism](#)", 2025.

Lesson 5: Tell a powerful story

Frames and values are most powerful when they are woven into a story. Human beings don't just process information, we look for **meaning, cause and resolution**. Stories do this far more effectively than a list of facts - not just any story but one with a principle at stake, and with a resolution that points to the world we want to build.

Always begin with a **value**. It signals why the issue matters, what is at stake, and what kind of world we aspire to. From there, the other elements of the story flow naturally:



The value – the principle we want to uphold (justice, care, freedom, security).



The threat – what is at risk if nothing changes; the harm or loss that will result if the value is not protected.



The villain – whatever is responsible for undermining it. Note: Be careful not to fall into the trap of framing the 'villain' as another group of people to be blamed - which risks reinforcing division – rather keep the focus on harmful systems or practices.



The hero – the person, community, or "we" who embodies or defends the value.



The resolution – the action that consolidates and advances the value and moves us toward the society we want.

For example, a story about girls' education might begin with the value of **justice**, the belief that all children deserve the same opportunities. The **threat** is that, without change, girls will continue to be denied schooling, cutting them off from their potential and limiting their future opportunities. The **hero** is the collective "we": girls themselves together with families, teachers, policymakers, standing up for fairness. The **villain** is the set of barriers and biases that keep girls out of classrooms. And the **resolution** is the set of actions we must take: ensuring access, resources, and policies that deliver equality.

The same facts can be told in different ways, but when they are structured through values, the story not only informs but also inspires. **People see both the problem and the pathway to change.**



The following example shows how the framework might be applied to communication on barriers to gender equality in the workplace, using children's wellbeing as a frame.



THE FRAME : CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

THE ARCHITECTURE

- **Value** – Care : every child deserves care and guidance from both parents.
- **Threat** – When either parent loses out on caregiving because of inflexible workplaces or underlying gender norms, children lose the full closeness and protection they need to thrive.
- **Villain** – Employers/systems that don't care about/allow for family responsibilities.
- **Hero** – Institutions/companies that step up for families.
- **Resolution** – Supporting all parents to care equally gives children the best start in life.

HOW THE STORY MIGHT SOUND...

"We all want our children to grow up safe, loved, and thriving. But when rigid workplaces or outdated gender roles keep one parent from fully caring, children miss out on the closeness they deserve. That's why we simply cannot go on accepting systems that refuse to make space for family life. The good news? When companies and institutions step up, enabling flexibility and supporting all parents to share care equally, children get the strongest foundation for their future - and we all benefit."



You can adapt the tone, length and format to the audience and objective, including the facts and evidence required too. What matters most is understanding the value and frame that will work for your audience and applying the frame with thoughtfulness.

Always begin with the value, then tell a story that makes that value visible in people's lives. When you do this, you move beyond facts and figures into narratives that connect, motivate and endure.



Lesson 6: Root communication in shared references

Framing is not only about the choice of values but also about situating communication within **shared references**. Subtle cues that evoke a sense of belonging, the sense that this is about us, can be powerful, provided they avoid defining "us" by excluding an "other".

Such **contextualisation** can indirectly refer to a positive historical development in a country or to factors that have positively influenced a **sense of belonging** within a community (for example, events or movements contributing to nation-building or leading to democratisation or to freedom from oppression at the national or local level).

Contextualisation to people and place makes communication feel authentic and rooted in a common story. When done with care, it links to the familiar while keeping the sense of "we" inclusive, showing that equality can be part of tradition and belonging rather than opposed to them.

Lesson 7: Test and Learn

There is no single formula for creating the perfect message. What works in one context may fall flat in another, depending on the values people bring with them. This is why **testing messages** can be so valuable.

The necessary resources should be invested to carry out structured audience research - through focus groups, surveys, or message experiments - to see how different narratives resonate. These methods provide more reliable insights than those of colleagues or partners, who may not reflect the full range of perspectives in the wider public.

Even where such formal research is not possible, it is still worth paying close attention to how messages land in real life: which phrases spark interest, which stories gain traction, and which arguments cause conversations to shut down. Communication is rarely a one-time event; it is an **ongoing process of learning, listening and adapting**.

With this in mind, the scenarios in Section Two hereunder draw upon existing research with different audiences to illustrate how the lessons we have explored so far could play out in practice, showing both pitfalls to avoid and approaches that connect more powerfully with people's values, and providing a starting point for you to explore.



VALUES-BASED COMMUNICATION

7 KEY LESSONS

1

ALWAYS **FRAME**
YOUR COMMUNICATION



Words are
NEVER NEUTRAL

Metaphors are
POWERFUL FRAMES

2



freedom

care

justice

IN **POWERFUL VALUES**

3

FRAME WITH SHARED VALUES THAT

((RESO



NATE))

WITH THE **MIDDLE GROUND**

4

RECLAIM THE

COLLECTIVE



'WE'

5



Values
Threat
Villain
Hero
Resolution

6

ROOT COMMUNICATION IN
SHARED REFERENCES



7



TEST AND LEARN

OBSERVE

Take the **CONTEXT** into account



SECTION 2

Applying the lessons of values-based communication

Having outlined the basic principles of framing, we turn to this section which lays out five scenarios, each with a different audience holding a particular set of values, to examine how these principles could be applied in practice. Some words or frames may feel more challenging in the context of gender equality, but the aim is to open conversations, not to close them down. Progress comes from meeting people where they are, not where we want them to be. When dialogue is enabled, ideas can shift and new understandings emerge.

The most important thing to remember is that each audience and each context is specific. The following scenarios give ideas of words and phrases you might use, but any communication must be fully adapted according to the purpose, the audience, the values they hold, and the context. In the following examples, we focus on a diversity of audiences, but with an intentional emphasis on **including men and boys**. Engaging these audiences is essential, as progress on gender equality depends not only on empowering women but also on fostering shared responsibility and participation across society.



Scenario 1: A group of fathers

Imagine a scenario where you are addressing a group of fathers gathered in a community hall. Most of them grew up in families where **gender roles were very clearly divided**. The men provided, the women cared. Fathers see themselves as protectors, as people who carry duty on their shoulders. They're proud of working hard for their families, of being steady, of passing on good values to their children.

These men hold values of **duty, tradition, and responsibility**. They want to do the right thing. They don't necessarily think of themselves as politically "progressive", but they do care deeply about family stability and about being respected as good fathers. Those are strong starting points.

So how might a discussion on gender equality take place in this context? Instead of using an entry point like "equality of rights between men and women," which may feel distant from their daily concerns, the conversation can be framed around values that sit closer to their worldview: duty, responsibility and tradition.

Here are some examples of how we might speak to this group of fathers, framing equality not as a break from tradition but as a **deeper expression of what they already value**:

"A father's responsibility is to give his children the best start in life."

"Sharing the load makes a stronger family team."

"Passing on tradition means showing sons and daughters how to live with respect and fairness."

"When both parents carry the load, children feel more secure."

These short phrases don't challenge duty and tradition - they build on them. **They expand the idea of responsibility from financial provision alone** (the "breadwinner model") to **include care, presence, and partnership**. Gender equality is framed not as abandoning tradition, but as fulfilling it more honestly and lovingly.

So, in practice, with this audience, in this context:

- Messages expressed in terms of "rights," can work better if they focus on **"responsibility."**
- Messages about "empowerment," can land better if they focus on **"duty."**
- Messages about "choice," can be turned into messages about **"stability and protection."**



Research shows that this framing can work across different contexts.

As just one example, in the Eastern Partnership Fathers' Schools Programme, men who joined "Papa Schools" in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - reported significant changes.⁷ They began to talk about pregnancy and parenting as a joint project, and were far more likely than other fathers to believe that both partners are equally responsible for providing for the family and for managing the household. What made the difference was not facts and figures, but the way equality was framed: as responsibility, as duty, as what a good man does for his family.

Research in Finland explores the evolution of the narrative of 'responsible fatherhood' in Finland and how this notion of 'responsibility' has over time broadened to include nurturing and caring, and supported Finland's journey towards a society recognised for high levels of gender equality.⁸

So, when we use these values-based entry points, we are not asking fathers to give something up. We are offering them a way to live out their values - duty, responsibility, tradition - in a way that makes their families stronger and their role as fathers richer.

7. UN Women and UNFPA. Final Evaluation of the Regional Joint Programme: EU 4 Gender Equality – Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence. Evaluation by CALIBRATE, 2025.

8. Eerola, Petteri. [Responsible Fatherhood: A Narrative Approach](#). PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2015.

Scenario 2: Young entrepreneurs

Now imagine you are in a co-working space with a group of young entrepreneurs, including men and women. They are ambitious, energetic and see themselves as fair-minded. What unites them is a **strong belief in merit**: everyone should have equal opportunities, and the rules should apply equally. They dislike anything that looks like bias or double standards, and they bristle at the idea of “special treatment.”

For this group, **fairness** is a core value. But here is the problem: when gender equality is framed through a **gap frame**, it is rarely effective.

What is a gap frame ?

It is when we talk about inequality by **pointing to the numbers** — the statistical gaps between women and men, for example:



“The **gender pay gap** is 14%.”

“Women are **underrepresented** in leadership roles.”

“Only 30% of parliamentarians are women.”

These facts are all true, but these gaps are often explained as “different choices.” Numbers do not automatically signal unfairness.

What works better in this context is showing inequality as **unfair treatment**: when people don’t get a fair chance, when outdated rules get in the way, when the playing field isn’t level. This connects directly to the value of fairness of this group.

Here are some examples of how the need for gender equality might be expressed in this context, using phrases that are more likely to resonate with this group:

**“It’s unfair when parents are penalised
at work for balancing family and career.”**

**“It’s unfair when outdated ideas hold good
people back from promotions they deserve.”**

**“Fair workplaces make sure everyone has the same
chances, without assumptions based on gender.”**

“A fair system means the rules are the same for everyone.”

So, in practice, with this audience, in this context:



Messages expressed in terms of the “pay gap” can work better if they focus on **“fair pay.”**



Messages about “underrepresentation” can land better if they focus on a **“fair shot at promotion.”**



Messages about “systemic discrimination” can be turned into messages about **“unfair rules.”**

Research bears this out. Work done in Australia by the foundation VicHealth and the organisation Common Cause identified and tested messages with a large “persuadable middle” - people (of any gender) who were not against gender equality but not clearly in support, either. The research showed that this group often explained unequal outcomes as the result of men and women making different choices, rather than as discrimination. As a consequence, statistics about gaps on their own did not persuade them. But when gender inequality was framed in terms of **unfair treatment**, for example, people missing out on fair pay rises or promotions because of gender bias, people in the persuadable middle strongly agreed this was wrong. In fact, 90% said it was wrong for women to be paid less for the same work, 90% said it was wrong for women to be overlooked for promotions they deserved, and 87% said it was wrong to make assumptions about people based on gender.⁹

So, when we enter a space like this, we don’t need to seek to change people’s values. We need to show that gender equality is about protecting the value they already hold most strongly: fairness.

⁹. VicHealth and Common Cause Australia. Framing Gender Equality: Message Guide. Prepared for the Together for Equality and Respect Partnership, 2021.

Scenario 3: Young men and boys at risk of manosphere influence

Let's imagine you're sitting with a group of teenage boys and young men. They've grown up in a digital world, and some of their reference points come from YouTube or TikTok clips that mock feminism or talk about "real men". They don't necessarily hate the idea of gender equality, but they feel suspicious of it. They worry about double standards, about being blamed, or about losing respect. They crave **belonging**, purpose, and a sense of how to be "a good man" in a confusing world.

Some of this outlook has been shaped by what is often called the **manosphere**: a network of online communities and influencers that discuss masculinity but frequently spread misogynist and anti-gender narratives. These spaces present feminism as a threat, portray women in negative or stereotyped ways, and promote rigid ideas of what it means to be a man. They sometimes even promote violence against women. Their influence works not only by offering a sense of belonging, but also by fuelling **resentment** and **division**.



In conversations with young men, it is important to offer a **positive version** of gender equality, avoiding lecturing them about 'toxic masculinity' or reciting statistics on male violence, which can make them defensive and further disaffected. The aim is to connect with what matters to them, for example **belonging, respect, fair treatment**.

The following are examples of how gender equality might be presented in ways that resonate in this context:

"Fair rules for everyone - no double standards." (fairness)

"Being strong means keeping your word and treating others with respect." (respect)

"Real leaders don't put others down - they lift the team up." (belonging, recognition)

"Consent is clarity - everyone deserves the same protection." (justice, security)

"A good man is someone others can rely on." (respect, recognition)

These short phrases do not undermine the values of this group, they build on them. They expand fairness from a flat "everyone treated the same" to **fairness as equal rules and accountability**. They expand **strength** from physical dominance to **self-control, respect, and reliability**.

So, in practice, with this audience, in this context:

- ✎ Avoid messages around "toxic masculinity" and rather focus on "**respectful strength**."
- ✎ Messages like "patriarchy harms women" can work better when turned into messages around "**rigid rules box guys in, too - fair rules free everyone**."
- ✎ Messages stereotyping or blaming boys can be turned into messages like "**be the guy others can rely on**."
- ✎ Messages like "believe women (full stop)" can be turned into messages like "**take reports seriously and run a fair process for everyone**."

Research with Spanish adolescents found that many boys feared feminism had "gone too far," and worried about issues such as false accusations, showing the need to emphasise fairness and equal processes to lower defensiveness.¹⁰

Framing studies warn against casting men only as protectors or problems and instead recommend engaging boys in ways that stress accountability, belonging, and positive roles across private and public life.¹¹ Throughout the research a "**crisis of connection**" is highlighted among young men - loneliness, lack of purpose, and confusion about masculinity - which the manosphere exploits. Offering belonging, respect, and **pro-social purpose** is essential if gender equality messages are to resonate.

So, when we frame like this, we're not asking young men to give something up. We're offering them a way to **live out their values** - fairness, belonging, respect, recognition - in ways that make them stronger and their communities healthier.

10. <https://lainterseccion.net/narrativas/que-hacemos-con-los-adolescentes-que-temen-al-feminismo/>

11. Birchall, J., Edström, J. and Shahrokh, T. (2016) Reframing men and boys in policy for gender equality, EMERGE Policy Brief.

Scenario 4: Mothers under pressure

Let's imagine you're at a social gathering with a group of mothers from the same neighbourhood or whose children attend the same school. Some say life used to feel simpler. Today, work is unforgiving, childcare is costly, and everyone seems exhausted. They hear the slogan "**have it all**" (the idea that women can succeed at work, at home, and everywhere else), but to them it really means "**do it all**." A few admire the online "trad wife" ideal (a movement promoting a return to idealised traditional full-time wife and homemaker roles) because it looks calmer and more ordered. Several feel equality 'talk' has **overreached** and turned into double standards. They're not anti-equality; they're anxious and tired.

These women hold values of **security, balance, care, and social cohesion**. They want family life to be sustainable, communities to feel steady, and rules that don't pit people against each other. Their worry is that gender equality has become a **zero-sum pressure** (suggesting that what benefits one group invariably disadvantages another) that threatens to tear apart the fabric that is struggling to hold society together.

So how might we talk about gender equality here? Not as more pressure or another box to tick - but as a way to **share the load**, reduce burnout, and keep communities cohesive.

The following are examples of how the need for gender equality might be expressed in ways that resonate in this context:

"No one should have to do it all - we share the load."

"Equality means balance, not burnout."

"Strong families are a partnership."

"Respect the work we all do - paid and unpaid."

"A fair society makes care doable."

These phrases meet the nostalgia/overwhelm feeling ("life was easier/better before") head-on. They recast gender equality as **relief and balance**, not as an endless ask. They also connect equality to **social cohesion**, what keeps us steady together.

So, in practice, with this audience, in this context:



Messages expressed in terms of "women should be able to do everything" can work better if they focus on messages around "**no one should have to do everything alone**".



Avoid messages saying "traditional roles are outdated", and rather focus on messages like "**partnership is what keeps families strong and secure**".



Messages about "closing the gender pay gap" can work better if they are turned into messages like "**get rid of unfair rules and outdated norms that make life harder for families**".



Messages like "we must empower women" can focus rather on messages like "**we must share responsibility, so no one is overwhelmed**".



Messages such as "increase women's labour-force participation" can be turned into messages like "**make good jobs and childcare work together**".

So, when we do not dismiss the fears and difficulties of this group, but talk about **resilience, care, and protection**, our messages on gender equality resonate more strongly, because they answer the real need: not to return to the past, but to feel secure and cared about in the present.

Scenario 5: Engaging the "Big We"

You are part of a group of organisations drafting a shared statement on gender equality. Around the table, the discussion turns to language: "Do we talk about women specifically? Do we need to name every group affected? What if it sounds clumsy or puts people off?"

These are common anxieties. Some worry that naming women alone leaves others out. Others feel that long lists risk alienating the very audiences you want to reach. The result can be paralysis - people hesitate to say anything at all.



A few rules of thumb can help:

- **Start from the universal:** open with the value or principle that applies to all of us.
- **Bridge to the specific:** bring in concrete illustrations of who it applies to in this context.
- **Use examples, not lists:** show how the principle applies in real life, rather than naming every group.
- **Keep women centred without isolating:** name women clearly when appropriate, but where possible try to show how the issue affects everyone more widely.
- **Be tactical:** adapt your framing to the audience - sometimes specificity builds trust, other times broader language builds collective resonance.

Examples might look like this:

**"No matter who we are or where we come from,
we all deserve a fair chance to succeed.
That means levelling the playing field for women, young people,
and others whose opportunities have been limited."**

**"Everyone deserves to feel safe – that means tackling
violence against women and also protecting anyone
from being targeted for who they are or whom they love."**

**"Stereotypes hold people back – for example, women passed
over at work, or men discouraged from caring for their families."**

**"Gender equality is about women's rights, and ensuring all of us
can live free from outdated limits on who we can be."**

**"None of us should face barriers to contributing in our workplaces,
schools, or communities - whatever our age, gender, or skin colour."**

Avoid :

-  Language that divides into "us" and "them" - e.g. "including marginalised groups."
-  Labels that define people only by weakness or difference - e.g. "vulnerable groups" or "minorities."
-  Long lists of categories that read like a checklist rather than a shared principle.

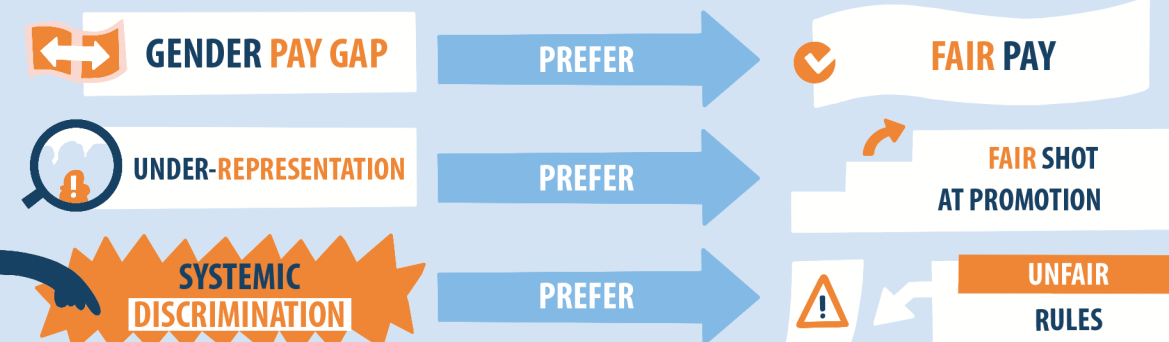
Together **these scenarios show there is no single narrative that will work for everyone**. When we take the time to frame our messages through the prism of the values of our audiences - values that we share, communication becomes a bridge, not a barrier. In this way we don't just communicate, we connect - and connection is what moves societies forward.

APPLYING THE LESSONS OF VALUES-BASED COMMUNICATION

TO **5** AUDIENCES

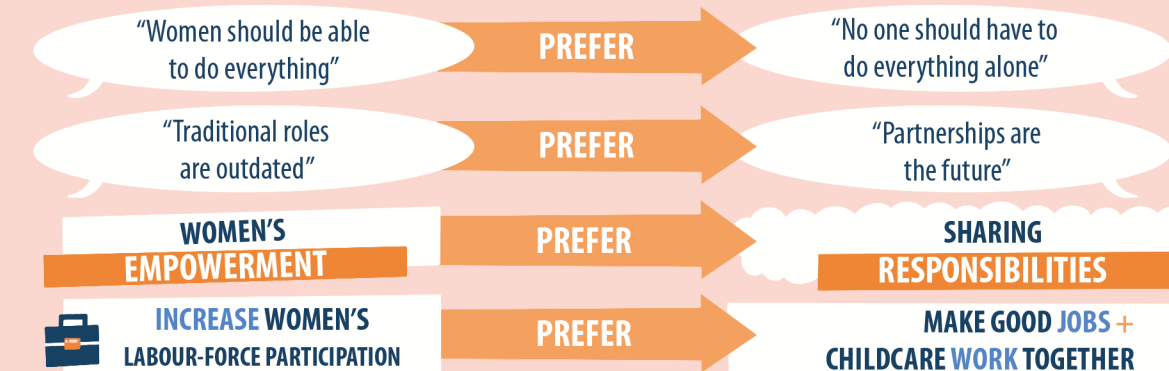
YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS

RELY ON FAIRNESS + STRONG BELIEF IN MERIT



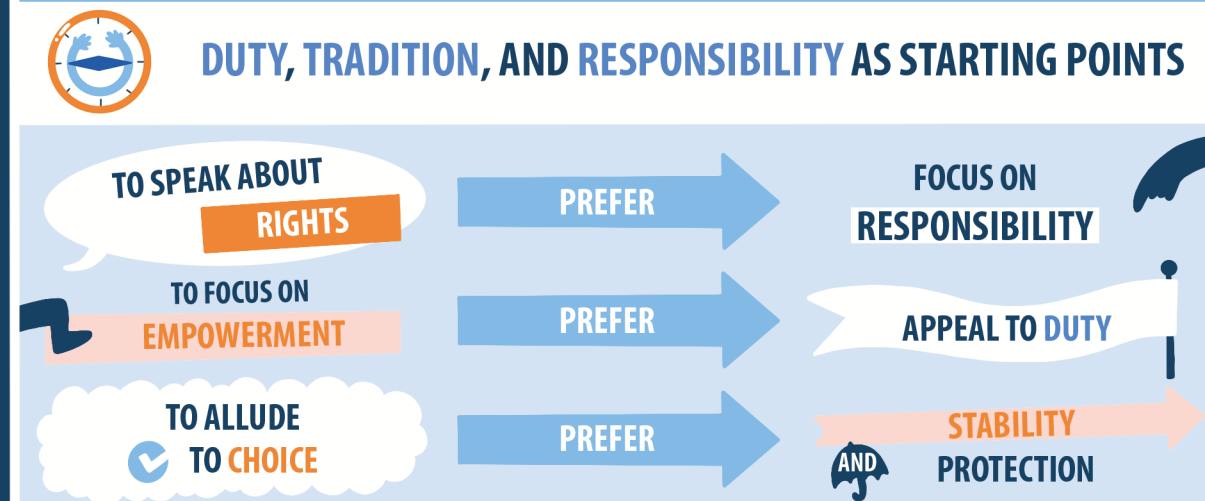
MOTHERS UNDER PRESSURE

RELY ON BALANCE + SHARING THE LOAD



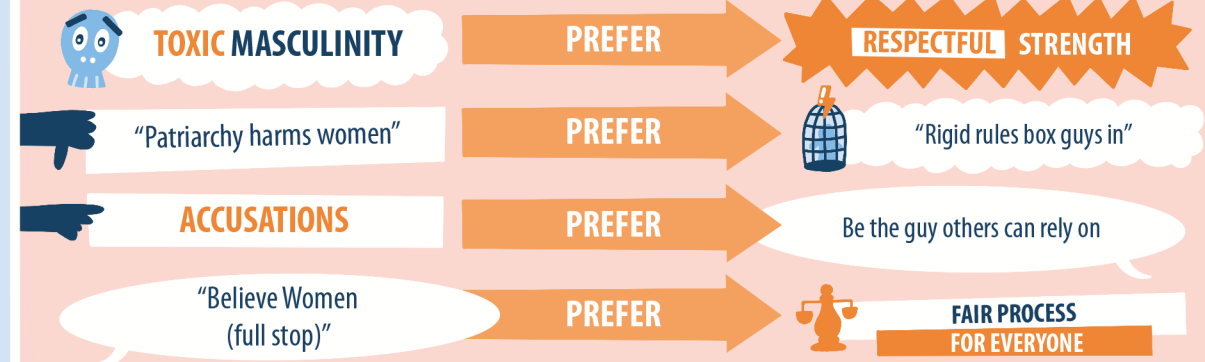
A GROUP OF FATHERS

DUTY, TRADITION, AND RESPONSIBILITY AS STARTING POINTS



YOUNG MEN AND BOYS AT RISK OF MANOSPHERE INFLUENCE

RELY ON BELONGING, RESPECT, RECOGNITION



ENGAGING THE "BIG WE"

TENSION BETWEEN INCLUSION + REPRESENTATIVITY

- 1 START FROM THE **UNIVERSAL**
- 2 BRIDGE TO THE **SPECIFIC**
- 3 USE **EXAMPLES**
- 4 KEEP **WOMEN CENTRED**
- 5 ADAPT THE FRAMING TO THE **AUDIENCE**



NO "US" AGAINST "THEM"



NO LABELS

Values-based communication checklist

Finally, in order to help you see if you have applied all the lessons to your communication, here is a simple table you can fill in.

	Question	Evidence
	AUDIENCE Have I clearly identified who my audience is, and what matters to them?	
	VALUE Have I chosen the value most likely to elicit support (justice, care, freedom, fairness, protection, etc.)?	
	LEAD WITH VALUE Does my message begin from that shared value, not from facts, gaps or costs?	
	FRAME Am I clear what my frame is and how the value supports the overall frame?	
	HARMFUL FRAME Have I checked that I am not merely negating and actually repeating or reinforcing harmful frames?	
	STORY Have I been able to tell a coherent story using the value, threat, villain, hero and resolution framework?	
	COLLECTIVE “WE” Does the message show how this affects all of us, not just 'others'?	
	REFERENCES Where appropriate, have I rooted the message in familiar cultural or social references that feel authentic?	
	TEST Have I been able to test my narrative with representatives of the audience I want to reach?	

SECTION 3

The link between gender equality and democracy

We will now explore how values-based framing can be applied to **strengthen the relationship between gender equality and democracy**. Democratic backsliding is a growing concern across Europe, and anti-rights rhetoric questioning gender equality is increasingly used to weaken both trust in democratic institutions generally and international commitments to human rights specifically. The aim is therefore to support the Council of Europe’s work as guardian of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This work also contributes to the process of the development of a New Democratic Pact for Europe by the Council of Europe by 2026.

This section develops the lessons previously set out and explores how values-based framing can help anchor gender equality as a cornerstone of democratic resilience and renewal. It does so by connecting to **four broad frames - fairness, freedom, responsibility and stability** - which provide starting points for messages and stories that resonate across diverse audiences, holding differing world views. These frames are not fixed formulas, but examples that can be adapted or tailored to different national, cultural and linguistic contexts.

The overarching aim is to encourage more strategic narrative work on gender equality and women’s rights: choosing frames that connect with the values most relevant to different audiences and shaping messages that feel authentic and grounded in people’s lived realities. Above all, the goal is to create narratives that bring people in, rather than push them away: narratives that build bridges across differences, open space for dialogue, and strengthen the understanding of gender equality as a shared democratic value.



Developing positive narratives: process and focus

The work of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission sets out to shape positive narratives that strengthen support for gender equality and the elimination of violence against women. To do so, it was first necessary to identify the **key harmful narratives** in circulation and to examine the ideas they promote. This meant identifying **recurring patterns** in anti-gender narratives.

Mapping this landscape revealed **four recurring themes** that dominate opposition to gender equality and that strongly influence public debates across the European region:

- **Boys and men**, who are often portrayed as “losing out” in gender-equal societies, with gender equality framed as a threat to their rights or identity.
- **Family**, where claims suggest that gender equality undermines traditional family roles and values.
- **Society**, with gender equality depicted as socially divisive or destabilising.
- **Democracy**, where gender equality is framed as conflicting with national values, freedom of speech, or democratic choice.

From this analysis, it became clear that a narrower focus was needed in the context of this work. Given that not every strand of rhetoric questioning gender equality could be addressed in equal depth, it is important to focus on where (new) narratives could **add the most value**.

In this context, the relationship between gender equality and democracy emerged as the most urgent and strategic focus.



A focus on gender equality and democracy

Rhetoric questioning gender equality is increasingly used as a tool to **weaken democracy, restrict civic space** and **challenge international commitments**. This makes democracy both a pressing and a strategic focus for the Council of Europe’s work on gender equality. The upcoming New Democratic Pact is an opportunity for the Council of Europe to make stronger links between gender equality and democracy, and to combine efforts towards both more resilient and more equal democracies.

The harmful narrative

Across Europe and beyond, the framing of gender equality as destabilising, undemocratic and elite-driven has become widespread.

This narrative is **complex** and has different dimensions (which also vary in different contexts). It portrays gender equality as an elitist project disconnected from the concerns of “ordinary people.” Legal and international frameworks are recast as tools of cultural engineering, with “activists” accused of imposing feminist norms at the expense of democratic legitimacy.

This narrative frequently claims that gender equality is a “foreign” or external agenda, a form of cultural imperialism that undermines national identity and sovereignty. At the same time, gender equality is depicted as censorship and ideological tyranny, silencing dissent, policing language, and eroding free speech. It is further framed as a source of division and accused of fuelling conflict.

By portraying gender equality as both divisive and imposed, these narratives allow those questioning it to present themselves as the true defenders of democracy, the will of the people, freedom of expression and national sovereignty.





What is at stake?

This narrative is particularly concerning for anyone committed to gender equality and to democracy, because it undermines public trust in the **legitimacy of gender equality policies**, and it fuels broader anti-establishment sentiment towards democratic institutions.

First, **this narrative disconnects gender equality from core democratic values such as fairness, inclusion and freedom**. When gender equality is no longer seen as integral to democracy but as something separate or imposed, it loses moral and social legitimacy. This makes it easier to deprioritise commitments or even to actively dismantle existing protections, leaving gender equality open to being overturned across the region.

Second, **this narrative undermines international instruments by framing gender equality as a threat to national sovereignty**. This framing is used to resist international conventions, including those of the Council of Europe, weakening shared European commitments rooted in universal human rights. For the Council of Europe, it is essential to safeguard the legitimacy of its conventions, while supporting member states in advancing gender equality as a foundation for democracy.

Thirdly, **this narrative tends to gain traction in times of insecurity. In the current context of war, geopolitical tension, remilitarisation and social anxiety**, appeals to tradition and authority are often used to argue that gender equality should be set aside for the sake of national security or unity. Yet evidence shows that inclusive and gender-equal societies are more cohesive and better equipped to face crises. Far from weakening security, gender equality strengthens the very foundations on which resilience and peace depend.

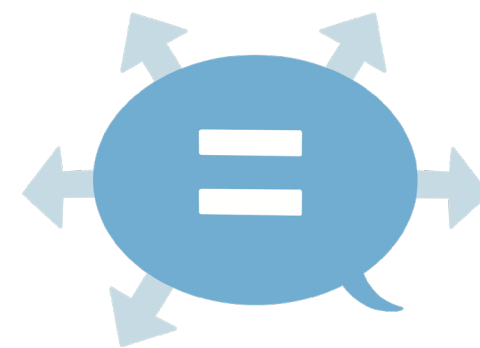
Taken together, these dynamics show why attacks on gender equality are rarely only about equality but are often part of broader anti-democratic agendas aimed at undermining pluralism, civic space and the rule of law. **Countering these narratives is therefore not just a matter of upholding women's rights, but of safeguarding democracy and human rights in Europe as a whole.**



Reframing gender equality as an enabler of democracy

A new narrative is needed to shift the focus in contexts where gender equality is portrayed as a threat to democracy, towards recognising gender equality as one of democracy's essential conditions. Far from undermining democratic values, gender equality is essential to ensuring that freedoms and rights are not reserved for some but are rather enjoyed by all. It strengthens democratic legitimacy by making inclusion, fairness and accountability tangible in people's everyday lives, and by showing that equality is not an add-on or an imposition, but part of the core values that keep democracy alive and trusted.

Making this discourse more widespread and mainstream is crucial. By actively showing that gender equality and democracy are mutually reinforcing actors at every level (governments, institutions, and civil society) can counter harmful narratives, protect democratic standards, and strengthen the foundations on which both gender equality and democracy thrive.





Value-based frames for positive narratives

The following section introduces four broad frames designed to re-anchor gender equality as a core democratic principle.

People respond primarily to emotions and values. Values are therefore an essential starting point for any narrative that seeks to connect across differences and to gather wide support for gender equality across the region.

The four frames proposed here are rooted in **values that are widely shared across societies: fairness, freedom, responsibility, and stability**. Each value-based frame acts as a lens through which to approach the relationship between gender equality and democracy. Looking through these lenses allows us to connect gender equality with what people already recognise as core principles in their lives.

Each example of frame follows the same structure:

-  **Core value** – the principle the frame is built on.
-  **Belief or reference point** – the everyday experience or intuition people already share.
-  **Threat** – what is at risk if nothing changes; the harm or loss that will result if the value is not protected.
-  **The villain** – whatever is responsible for undermining it, a system or a practice.
-  **The hero** – the person, community, or “we” who embodies or defends the value.
-  **Resolution** – how gender equality contributes to restoring this value and strengthening democracy.

For each frame, we propose examples of narratives. These examples illustrate how frames can be turned into broader storylines that resonate with audiences. But they are not the final step. To be effective, narratives must be brought to life through stories: concrete, context-specific examples that reflect people’s lived realities.

The four frames proposed here (fairness, freedom, responsibility, and stability) are **adaptable models**. They are starting points that need to be:

- **Contextualised** to national, cultural, or linguistic settings.
- **Enriched** with stories, evidence, and examples that make sense to the audience.
- **Tested** with different groups, especially the “movable middle” who are open to different perspectives.



The key is **authenticity**: frames work when they are rooted in values we genuinely share, and when they invite people in rather than push them away. When applied strategically and with the lessons of values-based framing in mind, these frames and the example narratives provided here can inspire the development of stories that feel real and relevant in each context, helping to firmly anchor gender equality at the core of the fight for democracy.



When confronted with rhetoric questioning gender equality, the temptation can be to refute it, but this is not the answer as by saying something is ‘not true’, the frame is in fact repeated and more likely to stick in people’s minds. **So never repeat the frames that are unsupportive of gender equality, instead “RE-frame”.**



Below are four sample narratives that have been developed with harmful arguments in mind. The values at the heart of those arguments have been switched around to demonstrate how gender equality supports and consolidates these values. Anti-gender rhetoric wants to tell us that gender equality takes democratic freedom away, whereas our narrative needs to show how it gives back freedom. Anti-gender rhetoric tries to tell us that “non-traditional gender roles” destabilise societies. Our narrative needs to show how gender equality contributes to stable societies and strong democracies. And so forth.



The frame: freedom to choose our own path

	CORE VALUE: Freedom. Everyone should be free to choose their own path, to have the autonomy to shape their own life, to be who they are, to express themselves openly, without fear of being silenced or excluded.
	BELIEF / REFERENCE POINT: From an early age, we feel the desire to make our own choices, to decide how we act and express ourselves, and who we want to be. As we grow, that desire for self-direction deepens: we want to be trusted to shape our own lives, to decide what we believe in and what matters to us. We know freedom means having the independence to make our own choices. Democracy is built on this: the freedom to speak openly, to challenge ideas, and to live as who we are.
	THREAT: Too many people are still boxed in by other people's ideas of who they should be and how they should behave, especially when it comes to gender. When freedom is restricted by rigid roles, people cannot live authentically, express themselves openly or decide for themselves how to live, work, and participate in society. This doesn't just limit individual freedom: it weakens the mutual respect and equal voice that democracy depends on.
	VILLAIN: Rigid gender roles, stereotypes, and systems of exclusion that dictate who people should be and that silence their voices. These deny people autonomy and shut down the diversity of expression that democracy needs in order to thrive.
	HERO: The women and men, young people and leaders, who push back against restrictive roles and speak up for the freedom to choose their own path. By challenging limits and widening space for expression, they defend both personal autonomy and the democratic freedom we all share.
	VALUES-BASED RESOLUTION: Gender equality is about giving people true autonomy and choice in their daily lives – at home, at school, at work, and in public – and the independence to make choices that reflect who they are. It is about removing the limits that dictate who we must be or how we must live and opening the space to choose our own path. It strengthens freedom of expression by opening the conversation to more people – across backgrounds, generations, and beliefs – so more voices are heard, and more ideas can flourish. Gender equality is how democracy delivers on its promise: by giving us all the freedom to live as who we are and the independence to shape our shared future, together.

THE FRAME IN ACTION: NARRATIVE EXAMPLE

Freedom is something we all care about. It means being able to choose our own path, to be ourselves, and to speak without fear of being silenced or excluded.

But too many people are still boxed in. Boys are told not to cry. Girls are told to be careful. People who do not fit stereotypical gender roles are laughed at, dismissed, or pushed aside. That kind of pressure may not look like force, but it narrows our freedom just the same.

Gender equality helps change this. It removes the limits that tell women and men who they must be, and it opens space for everyone to have the same access to work, power and resources. It means more of us can truly be ourselves or can simply speak out without fear. It gives people the independence to make their own choices and the autonomy to shape their lives. It supports freedom of expression by opening space – at home, at school, at work, and in public life – for everyone to contribute their experiences, ideas, and concerns.

Living freely also means living together: leaving room for difference, listening to one another, and allowing every voice to be heard. Gender equality thrives on this kind of open exchange. When marginalised voices are included, they share stories, shape better policies, and drive meaningful change. When more perspectives are heard, more solutions become possible.

That is the heart of democracy. When more people are free to choose their own path and are equally valued, we all gain a society where freedom is real, not just for some, but for all.



The frame: fairness

	CORE VALUE: Fairness. Everyone should have a fair chance to succeed and be valued for who they are.
	BELIEF / REFERENCE POINT: We instinctively understand, as children – whether in games, classrooms, or families – when something is not fair. Fairness is about being recognised, having an equal voice, and knowing that efforts can make a difference. As we grow, this simple lesson deepens into a core democratic value: an underlying belief that there should be a level playing field for everyone to succeed in life.
	THREAT: When fairness is denied, people are confined to unequal paths where their efforts and abilities matter less than their gender or other circumstances beyond their control. Talent is wasted, resentment deepens, and whole parts of society are shut out from contributing to our shared future. Over time, trust in institutions corrodes, divisions grow, and democracy itself is weakened, no longer seen as a system that gives everyone a fair chance.
	VILLAIN: Unequal systems and rigid gender roles that take away people's freedom and choices in life, particularly those of women, denying them recognition and opportunities based on their true abilities and contributions.
	HERO: Individuals, communities, and institutions who insist on fairness, who challenge stereotypes, remove barriers, and open doors so that talent and determination, not expectations based on stereotypical gender roles, shape people's futures.
	VALUES-BASED RESOLUTION: Gender equality is about ensuring everyone – no matter their gender, other aspects of their identity or life circumstances – has a fair chance to succeed and to be valued for who they are. It is about removing barriers, breaking down fixed roles and expanding opportunities so everyone can participate fully in all aspects of society. When this happens, democracy is reinforced, a democracy where every voice counts and where everyone has a genuine chance to succeed.

THE FRAME IN ACTION: NARRATIVE EXAMPLE

Fairness is something many people care deeply about. It is about being seen, having a voice, being rewarded equally and benefiting from the same chance to thrive as anyone else.

When fairness is denied, people, particularly women, are confined to unequal paths where their efforts and abilities matter less than their gender or than circumstances beyond their control. Talent is wasted and whole parts of society are shut out from contributing to our shared future.

Too many barriers prevent women and men from having the same opportunities. Those barriers can take many forms: sometimes it is about lack of equal access to education, work, or public life; other times it is about the social expectations that limit people's choices, and it is about roles - whether in caregiving or leadership - that society has not always recognised or rewarded equally.

Gender equality is part of removing those barriers and building that sense of fairness. It means everyone has the chance to contribute, care, and thrive equally. It opens up more ways for both women and men to participate fully, in workplaces, families, communities and public life. It supports dignity, recognition, and opportunity for people across a wide range of roles and life experiences.

Fairness means more than treating everyone exactly the same. In every community, people bring different strengths and face different challenges. Sometimes fairness means recognising when people have not had the same opportunities and levelling the playing field so they can take part fully.

Gender equality ensures that differences are not treated as obstacles but are understood as part of the richness of a healthy and democratic society. It is about extending fairness to women who have been overlooked at work or in their community, for example, or to men who want more space to care for their loved ones, to people whose voices have not always been heard, and to families working hard to balance care, work and community.

When we support gender equality, we are investing in a society where women and men can succeed on their own terms, where no-one's gender limits their opportunity, where we can all bring our best and be valued for who we are. Gender equality helps us all access the same rights and opportunities, together.



The frame: responsibility for each other

	CORE VALUES: Responsibility. Care. Society taking responsibility and caring for all its members.
	BELIEF / REFERENCE POINT: In society, we all have a responsibility to look out for and take care of others.
	THREAT: When no-one takes responsibility for gender-based violence, everyone is harmed. Women are left to suffer alone, perpetrators are emboldened, and more room is created to attack women and girls. When violence is tolerated for some, protection is weakened for all. Our societies become more fragile and we no longer believe in our democracy's ability to protect us.
	VILLAIN: Denial of responsibility to act – the silence and neglect that allows violence to continue.
	HERO: Families, neighbours, communities and institutions that live up to their responsibility for others and refuse to look away.
	VALUES-BASED RESOLUTION: A society of shared responsibility that refuses to look away, supports survivors, holds perpetrators to account, builds the conditions for gender equality and breaks the cycles of violence - strengthening people's faith in democracy's ability to keep everyone safe.

THE FRAME IN ACTION: NARRATIVE EXAMPLE

We are bound together through care, connection, and shared responsibility. Many people across the world are brought up with a simple guiding belief: we have a duty to look out for one another, especially when harm threatens those around us.

But if no-one feels concerned or responsible when gender-based violence is taking place, everyone is harmed. Women and girls are left to suffer alone, perpetrators are emboldened, and the space for violence grows. When violence is tolerated for some, protection is weakened for all.

What drives this harm is the denial of responsibility. Looking away sends the message that some lives matter less, and it erodes the bonds of trust and care that hold communities together.

Yet we also know the difference responsibility makes. When families, neighbours, communities and institutions step up - when they refuse to look away, and when they support survivors and hold perpetrators to account – they help to build the conditions for gender equality, and they begin to break the cycles of violence.

Think of the boy at school who hears his classmates making cruel jokes about a girl and chooses not to join in, but to speak up. Or consider the neighbour who hears shouting through the wall and calls the police. And consider the officers who take a call about violence against a woman seriously, making sure she is safe, treated with dignity, and that the violence is stopped. Responsibility does not rest on individuals alone: it is shared by the systems that are meant to protect us. These acts show that violence is not inevitable - that everyday choices, reinforced by institutions that do their duty, can change the story.

A society that lives by shared responsibility is one that strengthens people's faith in democracy. It shows that no-one will be abandoned to violence or fear, and that by caring for each other, we create safer, fairer communities - and a democracy we can all depend on.



The frame: stability and safety

	CORE VALUES: Stability and safety. The steady ground which families, communities and societies need.
	BELIEF / REFERENCE POINT: The importance of things staying stable, of being able to weather a crisis.
	THREAT: Stability weakens when families cannot draw on everyone's full potential to contribute. If care or income rests on one person alone, a sickness, a job loss, or an unexpected crisis can quickly unravel the balance that keeps households and communities steady. Too often, too much falls on mothers, leaving families overstretched and less able to cope when challenges come.
	VILLAIN: The missing supports, such as affordable childcare, family leave, fair workplace policies etc, and the rigid expectations that box people into narrow roles.
	HERO: Families and communities where women and men can both step in and share responsibility, backed by the right supports.
	VALUES-BASED RESOLUTION: When there is real gender equality, families are better protected against life's shocks, communities remain resilient, and societies stay steady. This stability is also the foundation on which democracy endures.

THE FRAME IN ACTION: NARRATIVE EXAMPLE

Stability is what every family wants. The reassurance that no matter what happens, life will not collapse under their feet. It is what allows parents to plan for their children and what keeps communities safe and steady in uncertain times.

But stability today often feels fragile. Many of us know how quickly life can become uncertain if one thing goes wrong – a job lost, a sickness, a crisis that no-one expected.

Families feel the strain when childcare is too expensive or too far away, when one parent, most often the mother, has no choice but to give up work because no-one else can step in, or when the household income does not cover the necessities of family life and children's wellbeing.

Gender equality helps to right that balance. Families thrive when mothers, as well as fathers, can freely choose to stay in work, when childcare is reliable and affordable, when all parents can take family leave when they need it.

Consider families who have weathered crises because both parents could step in. For example, a father who took parental leave so his partner could keep their small business running and was able to save it from bankruptcy. Or consider when a creche opens in a rural village, meaning a mother can keep working, bringing in a second income that carries the family through difficult times. Or think of when two people can step in and support with caring duties when an elderly parent becomes ill.

When families are steadier, we all feel the benefit. When responsibilities are shared, and the right institutional supports are in place, parents can have more time to contribute to their communities, neighbours have the energy to look out for one another, and a little bit of financial breathing space at family level can be the difference between local businesses staying open or closing their doors. What begins at home ripples outward, strengthening the fabric of society.

Gender equality underpins stable families, stable communities and stable societies. When everyone, women and men, can contribute to their full potential, share responsibility and cover for each other when things go wrong, we are all more secure, and our democracies rest on steadier ground.

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This initiative is a contribution towards the

New Democratic Pact for Europe

Why a New Democratic Pact for Europe?

Democratic backsliding, disinformation, impunity, and authoritarianism are undermining democracy in Europe. People are increasingly afraid and frustrated. It comes at a time when democratic security – the resilience of our democratic institutions, freedoms, and values – is our first line of defence against the threats we face. A collective response is needed. There is no quick fix and no single solution. With the New Democratic Pact, the Council of Europe unites with its partners to boost solutions that work and create new responses. To identify them, consultations are needed. The Pact will serve as a collective and inclusive process – not to reinvent democracy, but to reinforce its foundations, amplify its benefits, and innovate its form to make it tangible for everyone, especially younger generations. The directions set during the consultation phase running through 2026 will shape the work that follows.



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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