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GENDER EQUALITY COMMISSION

(GEC)

Guidance for the development of positive narratives to deflect anti-gender rhetoric

A practical guide for values-based communication to advance gender equality

1. Introduction

1. 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.

2. The purpose of this Guidance document 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.

3. 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".

4. This Guidance 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.

5. 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.

6. This Guidance was developed by the GEC 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 adopted the document at its plenary session in November 2025. The Guidance 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.

2. SECTION 1 – How to apply values-based communication: seven key lessons

7. 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.

2.1. Lesson One – Always frame your communication

2.1.1. Human beings are innately irrational

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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."

11. 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. [1]

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

12. 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'.

13. 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,

[1] 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. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM198205273062103

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.

14. 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*.

2.1.3. Never repeat and simply negate harmful frames - replace them instead

15. 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.

2.1.4. Metaphors are powerful frames

16. 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.

17. 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.*

18. 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.[2]

19. 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.

20. 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.

21. 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

[2] Thibodeau, P. H., & Boroditsky, L. (2011). "Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning." *PLoS ONE*, 6(2): e16782. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0016782

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.

22. 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.

2.2. Lesson 2 – Ground your message in values

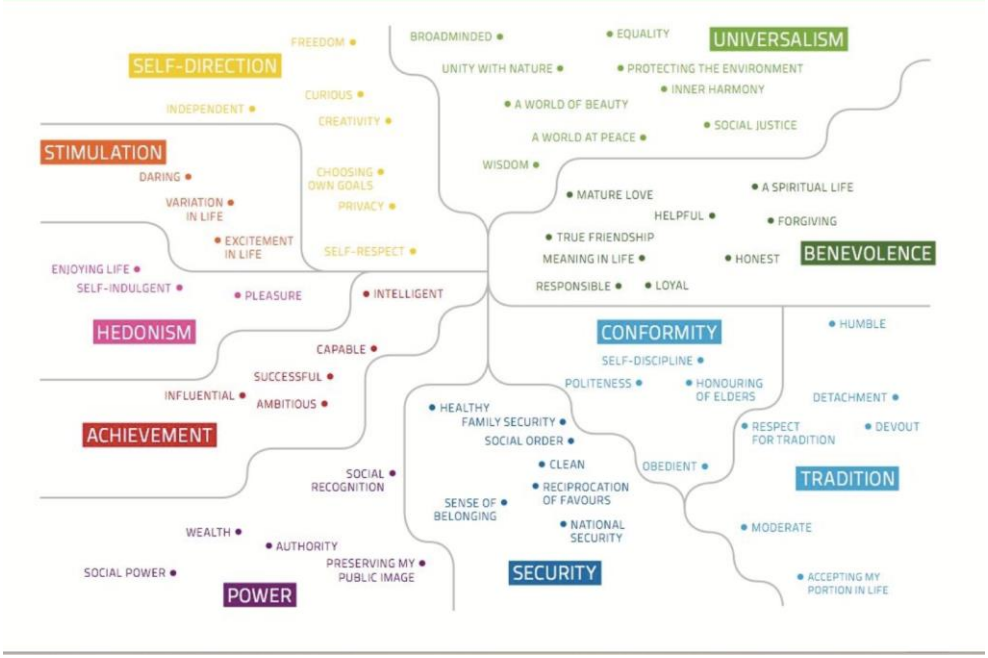
23. We have seen how frames and metaphors shape the way people think. But why do different audiences respond so differently to the same message? The answer lies in **values**. When we communicate, we are always appealing to values, whether we do so intentionally or not.

24. 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.

25. 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.

26. Surveys conducted with over 60,000 people across 64 countries found that values can essentially be categorized into ten basic sets of values which are shared across most cultures.[3]

[3] Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116



27. 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.

28. 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.

2.2.1. Anchoring messages in deeper values

29. 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.

30. 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

31. 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.

32. 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)

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

34. 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.

2.3. Lesson 3 – Frame through shared values that resonate with the "middle ground"

35. 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.

36. 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.

37. Message testing on reproductive rights demonstrated this clearly.[4] Parliamentarians were asked to agree or not with the following statements (placed separately within a longer survey):

1. "A woman should have the right to decide whether to continue with a pregnancy."

2. "A woman should not be coerced into continuing a pregnancy against her will."

38. Both conveyed the same core idea, yet support varied depending on value orientation. Among parliamentarians from political parties with a leaning towards libertarian principles,

[4] Message testing conducted by the International Planned Parenthood, European Network (IPPF EN).

support was substantially higher for the **freedom-from-coercion** wording than for the **right-to-decide** wording.

39. 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.

2.3.1. Stay authentic - frame on values that are shared

40. 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*).

41. 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.

42. 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.

43. 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**.

44. 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.

2.4. Lesson 4 - Reclaim the collective "we"

45. In today's hyper-polarized 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.

46. **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 polarized contexts is the sense that "we are in this together," grounded in our shared values, risks, and responsibilities.

47. Research shows that messaging which uses the **collective 'we'** can foster a shared identity rather than deepen divisions.[5]

48. 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.

49. 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 helped mobilize broader support across sectors, showing how anchoring an issue in a larger "we" can generate wider social resonance and drive systemic change.

2.5. Lesson 5 – Tell a powerful story

50. 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.

51. 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.

[5]Frameworks Institute
https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/articles/fast-frames-mindsets-and-movements-otherism/

- **The hero** – the person, community, or “we” who embodies or defends the value.

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

52. 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.

53. 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 a 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.

2.6. LESSON 6 - Root communication in shared references

54. 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.

2.7. Lesson 7: Test and Learn

55. 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.

56. 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.

57. 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.

58. 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.

3. SECTION 2 - Applying the lessons of values- based communication

59. 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.

60. 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.

3.1. Scenario one: A group of fathers

61. 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.

62. 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.

63. 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.

64. 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."**

65. 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.

66. 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."*

67. 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.[6] 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.

68. 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.[7]

69. 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.

3.2. Scenario two: Young entrepreneurs

70. 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."

71. 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.

72. **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."*

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

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[6] 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.
[7] Eerola, Petteri. ***Responsible Fatherhood: A Narrative Approach.*** PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2015. https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/45600/978-951-39-6111-4_vaitos24042015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

74. 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.

75. 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."**

76. 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."*

77. **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.[8]

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

3.3. Scenario three: Young men and boys at risk of manosphere influence

79. 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

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

blamed, or about losing respect. They crave belonging, purpose, and a sense of how to be "a good man" in a confusing world.

80. 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.

81. 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.

82. 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)*

83. 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*.

84. 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."*

85. 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.[9]

[9] https://lainterseccion.net/narrativas/que-hacemos-con-los-adolescentes-que-temen-al-feminismo/

86. 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.[10] 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.

87. 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.

3.4. Scenario four: Mothers under pressure

88. 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.

89. 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 that threatens to tear apart the fabric that is struggling to hold society together.

90. 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.

91. 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."**

92. 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.

93. 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*."

[10] Birchall, J., Edström, J. and Shahrokh, T. (2016) Reframing men and boys in policy for gender equality, EMERGE Policy Brief. Brighton: IDS

- 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*."

94. 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.

3.5. Scenario five: Engaging the 'Big We'

95. 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?"*

96. 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.

97. 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.

98. 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.”*

99. 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.

Annex 1: 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 frames: 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?	
[ ]	Have I been able to test my narrative with representatives of the audience I want to reach?	

Annex 2: Bibliography and Further Reading

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