

TRENDREPORT 1

January / 2026



THE PERSONAL IS STILL POLITICAL: WHY THE RISE OF MISOGYNY THREATENS DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Misogyny is becoming structurally normalized, shaping political discourse, digital environments, and institutional practices despite formal progress on gender equality, as democratic backsliding creates permissive conditions that render this dynamic bidirectional and mutually reinforcing.

Digital platforms and emerging technologies amplify backlash dynamics, accelerating the spread and social acceptance of anti-gender narratives.

Rising polarization and economic insecurity are translating personal grievances into political backlash, weakening social cohesion and democratic participation.

The future of democratic resilience depends on containment measures achieved through coordinated governance, education, and norm-setting that affirm gender equality as a core democratic value.

KEYWORDS:

Misogyny, Digital, Democracy, Backlash

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Misogynie gewinnt zunehmend an struktureller Akzeptanz und beeinflusst politische Debatten, digitale Räume und institutionelles Handeln, trotz formaler Fortschritte bei der Gleichstellung. Demokratische Rückschritte begünstigen diese Entwicklung und verstärken sie wechselseitig.

Digitale Plattformen und neue Technologien beschleunigen gesellschaftliche Gegenbewegungen, indem sie die Verbreitung und Normalisierung von Anti-Gender-Narrativen erleichtern.

Wachsende Polarisierung und wirtschaftliche Unsicherheit führen dazu, dass persönliche Frustrationen politisiert werden. Dies schwächt den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt und die demokratische Beteiligung.

Die Stärkung demokratischer Resilienz erfordert gezielte Gegenmaßnahmen: koordinierte politische Steuerung, Bildung und klare gesellschaftliche Normen, die Geschlechtergleichstellung als grundlegenden demokratischen Wert verankern.

KEYWORDS:

Misogynie, digital, Demokratie, Gegenreaktion

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One of the most extreme and alarming manifestations of misogyny, fueled both offline and increasingly through online hate, harassment, and radicalization, is femicide: worldwide, a woman is killed every ten minutes by an intimate partner or a male family member. Thirty years after the Beijing Declaration, global progress on gender equality reveals a paradox of gains amid deepening backlash. Women's parliamentary representation has more than doubled since 1995, yet nearly three-quarters of seats remain male-dominated (UN Women, 2025a). Concurrently, gender-based violence surges, while online harassment impacts 53% of women in Europe and Central Asia (UN Women, 2025a). Misogyny, increasingly amplified by digital subcultures such as the "manosphere" and by emerging AI technologies, is becoming normalized within political discourse and online environments, posing growing risks to democratic participation and social cohesion (UN News, 2025; Bates, 2025). This report defines the increasing rise of (online) misogyny as a trend for 2026 and outlines scenarios for the future with a focus on the interplay of gender and democracy.

MISOGYNY AS A STRUCTURAL AND DIGITAL PHENOMENON

Misogyny encompasses attitudes, narratives, and practices expressing hostility toward women, opposing equality, and reinforcing

the subordination of patriarchally constructed femininity. Beyond its direct harms, resurgent misogyny functions as both a driver and an early warning signal of democratic erosion. Where democratic institutions weaken, misogynistic narratives become more visible, politically usable, and socially legitimate; in turn, the normalization of gender-based exclusion narrows participation, degrades public discourse, and accelerates institutional decay. This mutually reinforcing dynamic positions misogyny not merely as a consequence of democratic backsliding, but as a measurable indicator of it.

Today's key drivers include digital ecosystems, particularly the "manosphere," loosely connected online networks that promote male

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supremacy, rigid gender roles and mainstream misogynistic narratives through forums, influencers, and "red pill" ideologies that frame feminism as societal decay (USA Today, 2025a; Deutsche Welle, 2025). AI exacerbates this, embedding biases in deepfakes, chatbots, and metaverses, recreating harms from education

to intimacy (Bates, 2025).

However, sexism harms all: a 62-nation study links hostile as well as benevolent sexism to anti-democratic practices, violence, and poor health and economic outcomes (Zawisza et al., 2025). Emerging neuroscientific research further suggests that sustained exposure to gender inequality is associated with thinner cortical regions linked to stress regulation in women, with potential long-term implications for mental health and well-being (Zugman et al., 2023). A key obstacle to leading these findings into meaningful political or societal change is growing polarization and identity politics, which encourage competing narratives and make it easier to dismiss evidence-based arguments altogether.

KEY DYNAMICS DRIVING THE NORMALIZATION OF MISOGYNY

The normalization of misogyny manifests across interconnected political, social, digital, economic, and cultural domains, buttressing gender inequality through mutually reinforcing structural and cultural mechanisms.

In the political domain of countries such as the US, Argentina, Italy, and Hungary, anti-gender campaigns increasingly frame gender equality as a threat to family values, national identity, or social cohesion. This framing has translated into tangible policy rollbacks, such as the introduction of total abortion bans in 13 US states (Britannica, 2025) and the normalization of demeaning rhetoric toward women by high-profile political leaders, reflecting a broader erosion of gender norms in public discourse (USA Today, 2025b). At the same time, misogynistic narratives originating in online subcultures increasingly shape electoral behavior, with survey data indicating that young men are disproportionately drawn to far-right parties and

anti-feminist positions (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025).

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In the social and digital domain, misogyny continues to manifest in widespread violence and harassment. Globally, approximately one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime (UN Women, 2025a). The most drastic consequence of this misogyny is femicide, which occurs every ten minutes worldwide (UN News, n.d.). In addition, online communities linked to the manosphere, such as “red pill” ideologies, are increasingly making misogynistic ideas more mainstream by using social media algorithms, anonymous participation, and influencer-led content, especially to reach younger audiences (USA Today, 2025a; UN News, 2025).

Economic and cultural dynamics further intensify these patterns. A persistent gender pay gap of around 20% (Financial Times, 2025) coexists with widening attitudinal divides among Generation Z, where 53% of young women versus 32% of young men identify as feminists, while 57% of young men perceive gender equality efforts as anti-male discriminatory (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). Economic precarity alone does not produce misogyny; rather, it becomes politically salient

when digital ecosystems translate material anxiety into identity-based grievance and provide simplified, gendered explanations for structural change. These political narratives gain traction not only through ideological alignment but through digital economies that reward outrage and grievance, translating economic insecurity into algorithmically amplified anti-feminist mobilization.

At the same time, new technologies such as artificial intelligence risk embedding and scaling misogynistic bias through deepfakes, virtual environments, and monetized content ecosystems (Bates, 2025). These developments also have real-world implications: empirical research shows that sexism correlates with broader societal harms, including higher levels of violence, poorer health outcomes, and weaker democratic practices for all genders (Zawisza et al., 2025; Euronews, 2025).

THREE PLAUSIBLE FUTURES FOR GENDER AND DEMOCRACY

The three suggested scenarios differ less in the existence of feminist resistance, which persists across all futures, than in its political effectiveness. The key variable is whether misogynistic mobilization becomes hegemonic (Scenario A), remains contested but polarizing (Scenario B), or is increasingly constrained and delegitimized (Scenario C). While Scenario B is the most likely, several factors (see section Leverage Points) could still influence its development.

SCENARIO A: ESCALATION AND NORMALIZATION

In this scenario, misogynistic narratives become further embedded across politics, media, and emerging technologies. Political parties increasingly adopt explicit anti-gender platforms, while

online- and AI-driven systems continue to amplify biased and harmful content due to weak regulation and profit-driven incentives. Manosphere networks expand their recruitment among economically insecure young men, contributing to growing support for far-right movements and anti-democratic actors. Coordinated harassment campaigns intensify and increasingly translate into offline intimidation and violence. Democratic participation by women declines as public spaces become more hostile, and progress toward global gender parity slows further, extending well beyond current projections. While feminist actors continue to mobilize, their influence is increasingly curtailed through legal restrictions, funding cuts, and digital harassment, limiting their capacity to shape policy or public discourse.

SCENARIO B: POLARIZED BACKLASH

In this scenario, rising misogyny triggers stronger counter-mobilization, resulting in a sharply polarized social and political environment. Feminist movements and professional networks secure regulatory and institutional gains in some regions, including improved platform governance and workplace protections, while other jurisdictions double down on gender rollbacks. These movements, though fragmented and unevenly resourced, play a central role in sustaining counter-pressure through litigation, transnational advocacy, and platform accountability campaigns, preventing full normalization while deepening polarization. Digital ecosystems fragment into better-moderated spaces that rely on a combination of human expertise and advanced technologies on the one hand, and entrenched misogynistic enclaves on the other. Although levels of social conflict and perceived gender tension peak, this polarization also accelerates innovation in education, governance, and coalition-building, particularly as evidence of sexism's broader societal harms fosters unexpected alliances.

SCENARIO C: CONTAINMENT AND DECLINE

In this scenario, coordinated interventions succeed in reducing the reach and appeal of misogynistic narratives. Stronger transparency and accountability requirements for platforms and AI systems limit algorithmic amplification and monetization of gender-based hate. Investments in gender-responsive education, media literacy, and programs engaging boys and young men contribute to gradual norm change. Economic inclusion policies reduce the resonance of grievance-based anti-feminism, while intersectional advocacy strengthens protections for those most exposed to violence and harassment.

LEVERAGE POINTS FOR DEMOCRATIC FEMINIST RESILIENCE AND ACTOR-SPECIFIC INTERVENTIONS

a. Platforms & AI developers

Digital platforms and AI developers are critical gatekeepers. Evidence from enhanced moderation regimes, transparency reporting, and advertiser pressure shows that algorithmic amplification of gender-based hate can be reduced when economic incentives are aligned with accountability. Mandatory risk assessments, independent audits, and liability for AI-enabled harassment represent emerging best practices (Bates, 2025).

b. States & Democratic Institutions

Governments retain decisive leverage through enforcement rather than new norms. Where gender-based violence laws are paired with judicial independence, survivor protection, and stable funding, reporting and deterrence improve. Conversely, democratic backsliding consistently correlates with weakened enforcement,

underscoring the importance of institutional capacity. Framing gender equality as a shared societal good rather than a zero-sum conflict highlights the well-documented harms of sexism for all and enables broader coalitions for change (Zawisza et al., 2025; UN Women, 2025b).

c. Education & Labor Market Actors

Interventions are more effective when education and economic inclusion are linked. Programs that combine media literacy with job pathways and social protection for young men reduce the appeal of grievance-based narratives more reliably than norm change alone (USA Today, 2025a; Ipsos & King's College London, 2025).

d. Women's Movements

However, prospects for coordinated response are constrained by the fragmentation of women's movements across generational, political, and geographic lines, as well as their increasing social diversity. While this pluralism enables resilience and context-specific mobilization, it complicates sustained enforcement and agenda-setting. Leverage points therefore lie in strategic convergence: aligning around shared red lines, strengthening transnational networks, and supporting movement infrastructure that enables documentation, legal pressure, and early warning under conditions of democratic backsliding.

What distinguishes the current moment from earlier efforts is not the novelty of tools, but the convergence of crises: digital platform concentration, economic insecurity, and democratic backsliding. These conditions increase both the risks of inaction and the potential returns of coordinated intervention. At the same time, the mixed record of past approaches highlights the need for experimentation, particularly at the intersection of digital governance, economic policy, and gender

equality.

THE DEMOCRATIC STAKES OF GENDER EQUALITY

Across all scenarios, one conclusion is clear: women's rights are not a peripheral or sectoral concern, but a foundational pillar of democratic resilience. When misogyny is normalized, whether through policy, platforms, or culture, democratic participation narrows, public debate deteriorates, and trust in institutions erodes. Conversely, societies that safeguard gender equality consistently demonstrate stronger social cohesion, healthier political discourse, and greater institutional legitimacy. Ensuring that women's rights remain central to debates on democracy, security, and governance is therefore not only a matter of justice, but of democratic survival. The future of democracy will depend, in no small part, on whether gender equality is defended as a core democratic value rather than treated as a negotiable add-on.

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