

Pluralistic Illusions and Gender Politics: How Misperceptions may Fuel Polarization in Young Women and Men

A. Timur Sevincer¹ & Gijsbert Stoet²

¹ Leuphana University Lüneburg, ² University of Essex

In the media and academia, there has been growing attention to political polarization and radicalization among young women and men. Some young women are moving toward the far left in the form of uncompromising, moralized progressive activism, while some young men are moving toward the far right in the form of reactionary online movements such as the manosphere and incel cultures. In this chapter, we trace recent developments and historical events that helped set the stage for these trends, and we link them to established psychological theories of extremism. We also offer a novel account based on our own work. Specifically, we argue that an important driver of this pattern of increasing gender extremism is a miscalibration in perceived gender inequality: gaps between subjective perceptions and widely used gender-inequality indexes, along with meta-perceptual errors about what “most others” believe. Building on our work on pluralistic illusions of gender inequality, we propose that overestimating both the prevalence and extremity of others’ views can create the impression that gender inequality is more persistent and pervasive than is suggested by the available gender equality indexes. These inaccurate beliefs may fuel support for extreme gender policies and contribute to the fierceness of ongoing debates around this topic