The Essence of the Chasm: Why is the Gender Ideological Gap an Identity Crisis Rather than a Policy Crisis

When discussing the widening gender ideological gap among Generation Z, the public generally confuses related concepts. Public opinion wrongly equates political division with conflicting policy positions, while many experts regard the political camps to which young men and women belong as the points of divergence in core values. This concern stems from a crucial misjudgment: confusing group ideology with genuine policy preferences, thereby concealing the root cause of the divergence. To find the true cause, we must first clarify what substantive changes have occurred. Generation Z did not deny the consensus on equality but merely reshaped political identity from a symbolic perspective.

To analyze this ideological divide, we adopt Ellis & Stimson's (2012) distinction between operational and symbolic ideology. The former refers to the policy propositions actually supported by the public, while the latter refers to the political labels people attach to themselves. Take the poll data in the United States as an example, the differences between the two are obvious at a glance. In recent years, the gap between Gen Z men and women in choosing the self-label of "liberal" or "conservative" has widened significantly. Mainstream analysis indicates that this difference has approached 30 percentage points (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). Although the extent of symbolic divergence in statistics from different surveys, such as the CES or ANES, varies slightly, all data point to the same rule: the divergence on identity labels is always far greater than that on actual policy positions.

On specific livelihood issues such as equal pay for equal work, paid parental leave, and abortion rights, the gap in positions between men and women has narrowed significantly, remaining in single digits, with an average of about 5 percentage points, and has remained stable for a long time. This is confirmed by the analysis of political scientist Tom Wood (Sides, 2024). The key point is that the data shows that the gender divide among the younger generation on such substantive policies is not significantly higher than that among the older generation (Sides, 2024). The empirical research of the American Institute for Boys and Men (2025) further confirmed this conclusion, completely overturning the common conjecture that "the policy concepts of this generation of youth have unique deviations." Contemporary young men have not abandoned the basic principle of gender equality, and the policy demands of young women have not undergone fundamental changes either. Public consensus on practical policies remains strong, calling for a shift in research focus. Growing divides arise not from fractured policy agreement, but from splits in people's political identities.

A transformed analytical perspective has redefined our core research questions. We no longer need to explore why young men seem to be resistant to gender equality, as empirical data has confirmed that they consistently support policies related to equality. Although their view of the abstract concept of feminism has deteriorated, their stance on key policies remains largely unchanged.

The real question is why young men and women, despite having highly similar policy views, tend to support each other's opposing political camps. This transformation redefines the morally overcast public debate as an objective social psychological inquiry, shifting the focus from moral judgment to the mechanisms of social group differentiation.

Lilliana Mason's (2018) "mega-identity" explains such identity grouping. It argues political labels now function as all-encompassing camp symbols combining moral views, lifestyles and group affiliation, rather than just policy positions. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Identity-Protective Cognition (Kahan, 2017), this escalating divergence is not an independent ideological shift between the two groups, but rather a dynamic system that stimulates and evolves in a coordinated manner. Essentially, it is the result of reciprocal radicalization. This theory was originally used to study extremism and can now be employed to explain the phenomenon of emotional opposition.

Identity-Protective Cognition can precisely explain the unique behavioral pattern of young men, which is to "reject label, retain policy". When the complex identity of "liberal-feminism" is shaped as a symbol with a sense of accusation and exclusion of the male group, people will prioritize maintaining the identity of their own group rather than adhering to ideological consistency. To avoid moral criticism and isolation from their peers, young men voluntarily abandon this opposing camp label, yet still support equality policies that do not involve identity conflicts and are related to practical interests. This deliberate disavowal of labels and stances serves to protect oneself and sustain group identity, not to reject gender equality values.

This two-way opposing cycle features mutual causality and originated among women. The social impact brought about by the fourth-wave feminist movement and the societal shock of #MeToo has made gender identity more prominent than ever among young women, giving rise to a strong sense of internal cohesion within the group. The concept of "linked fate" was initially used in racial studies (Dawson, 1994), and later extended to the field of gender (Simien, 2005) to describe this kind of connection. And this cohesion further endows the label of "liberal" with a strong

moral color. As such, identifying with the complex identity of liberals has become a common way for women to express group unity.

However, it is precisely this label endowed with moral attributes that has triggered a reverse reaction from the male group. In the eyes of young men, the current “liberals” are no longer a policy alliance that embraces diversity; instead, they have become a biased perspective of scrutiny, presupposing that men are inherently privileged. This sentiment is not a subjective assumption but is supported by data. Multiple surveys show that far more young men than women believe that the current measures to promote gender equality have been “overcorrected”. Ipsos (2024) data shows that 60% of Gen Z men believe that affirmative action has now evolved into discrimination against men, while only 40% of women hold this view. In the face of such psychological threats, men have initiated Identity-Protective Cognition and made the choice of “label decoupling.” Research by Equimundo (2023) shows that the vast majority of young men still support the core concept of equal opportunity, but are increasingly resistant to the term “feminist” - a term that has already been stigmatized. What they detest are the identity symbols with opposing connotations, such as liberal or feminist labels, rather than the true equality policies behind the symbols.

The “manosphere” on the Internet is not the source of this psychological opposition, but it is the key carrier that maintains the entire cycle. The algorithm platform has established an efficient information dissemination channel, while the manosphere generates corresponding remarks, playing a role in fanning the flames and shaping public opinion. It did not give rise to men’s resistance to liberal labels, but defined the manifestations of men’s defensive responses, magnified opposing emotions, and significantly lowered the threshold for participating in group opposition.

The behavior of the male group in cutting off their identity labels and expressing defensive views on the Internet will in turn affect the female group. Some women view the rise of remarks about men leaving the liberal camp and the online male group as a counterattack launched by patriarchal forces. This kind of view confirms women’s original sense of crisis, deepens the perception within the female community that their destinies are intertwined, and also makes their identification with the identity of a compound liberal more solid.

This causal handshake explains why gender ideological differences have continued to intensify in recent years. The initial systemic shock kicked off the division, and the coupled loop allowed the rift to widen continuously. Meanwhile, this theory also leads to a verifiable conclusion: the ideological shift of men lags behind

and closely follows the female displacement. The rising popularity of the manosphere on the Internet is a passive response, lagging behind the awakening of gender identity awareness among the female group.

There is a mainstream opposing view that needs to be analyzed: Critics believe that the divergence is merely a unilateral leftward shift by women, while the political stance of young men remains unchanged, and they claim that this reciprocal feedback loop theory is an over-interpretation that violates Occam's razor principle. However, three layers of empirical evidence and theoretical basis are sufficient to overthrow this nidirectional drift explanation. First, men's political attitudes are not static: The overall change in the concept of gender equality across generations proves that men's mindsets are also actively transforming rather than passively remaining still, which contradicts the assumption that men's positions remain constant. Secondly, the reciprocal coupled system model can explain the temporal feature that the rise of the male circle lags behind the awakening of female gender consciousness, which the simple unidirectional shift theory cannot achieve. Thirdly, the organized political confrontation initiated by men against affirmative action policies in South Korea further proves that men are not passively going with the flow. these factors undermine the unidirectional shift argument and justify the necessity of the reciprocal coupled system model.

If this phenomenon is indeed a mechanical, coupled system of mega-identity reorganization, it must only operate under specific, measurable scope conditions. Conditions One and Two trigger the cycle, and Condition Three governs how intense divisions become.

Three preconditions apply: First, a prominent female-focused attention surge, gauged by local #MeToo movements framed as gender confrontation. Second, algorithmic systems alongside regional male online communities. Third, political actors leveraging such emotional polarization for electoral campaigning.

Cross-national case comparisons clearly validate this mechanism. South Korea is an extreme case where all three conditions are met: the radical feminist movement is in full swing (Condition one), the algorithm forum is highly mature (Condition two), and the presidential election directly mobilizes voters with the campaign slogan of abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality (condition three). The United States follows a similar, albeit more decentralized, trajectory. While lacking a single policy target like Korea's ministry, the US exhibits Condition Three through the 2024 electoral cycle's highly gendered mobilization, where political entrepreneurs actively

courted the manosphere via male-centric “bro-podcasts” to harvest this affective polarization.

In contrast, in Italy, such a cycle of opposition has not formed there. Its deeply institutionalized cultural familism has formed a natural resistance, directly hindering the emergence of the first situation. In Southern Europe, the family has always been the primary economic and emotional support for the people, making it difficult for individualized gender opposition concepts to gain a foothold. As the key point that triggers the cycle of opposition has never emerged, no serious gender ideological differences have occurred among the Italian youth group.

This theoretical framework has strict falsifiability. In the short term, if poll data shows that policy stance differences and identity label differences are intensifying simultaneously and at a comparable rate, then this theory will not hold. Looking at the long term, even if the driving factors such as algorithmic dissemination and political hype gradually weaken, once the consensus between the two genders on core policies completely collapses and evolves into long-term opposition, it indicates that this has long transcended the game of identity symbols and has become a permanent split in values.

In conclusion, the “gender ideological divergence” that public opinion is concerned about is not the collapse of the common values of society. The public mistakenly regards the reconstruction of identity symbols as the break-up of core values. Differences do exist, but their essence has been seriously misinterpreted. It is neither that young men abandon the concept of equality, nor that the two groups are drifting apart. It is a set of interactive systems accelerated by network algorithms and stimulated by each other. The defensive stance of one side will constantly intensify the opposing emotions of the other side. After clarifying the restrictive conditions of this system, this phenomenon becomes traceable, predictable and verifiable. Ultimately, to understand this divergence, we should not be obsessed with judging who is right or wrong, but rather analyze how political identities gradually take shape in contemporary society amid mutual opposition.

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