

Policy Brief

Addressing Polarization in Europe and Africa

Centering Women in the Solution

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Community
of Democracies



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Executive Summary

Extreme political polarization is rising across the world and is undermining democracies and their political processes. This brief addresses three main trends in which polarization has contributed to democratic erosion: disinformation rooted in historical memories, declining societal trust, and increasing economic inequality. The trends are linked through common themes like feedback loops, in-groups, vs out-groups, and “us vs them” mentality, which increases the harmful effects of polarization, weakens democratic institutions, and contributes to the rise of authoritarianism.

The brief uses comparative examples from Europe and Africa to identify trends and challenges, while focusing on female involvement in solutions. Women can play a particularly powerful role in addressing these three contributors to polarization. Programs such as implementing inclusive historical education which highlights women, encouraging and creating leadership roles for women within their communities, and addressing the gender wage gap as well as empowering women to share their life experiences all center women as drivers for greater social cohesion. By embedding women’s leadership and perspectives into responses to disinformation, distrust, and inequality, societies can mitigate polarization and reinforce democratic resilience.



Introduction

Political competition and disagreement are natural and welcomed as functions of healthy democracies. They are necessary for the progression of society, however when political competition becomes polarizing and creates negative group relationships it threatens democracy. Currently, extreme polarization is a growing global challenge.

This policy brief seeks to analyze three emerging trends of polarization: disinformation and historical memory, societal distrust, and economic inequality, in order to deconstruct the large-scale global challenge of polarization. These trends were chosen for their ubiquity, impact, and imminent threat to the global democratic system. In defining and demonstrating each trend, examples from countries or regions in both Europe and Africa are used to illustrate the universal problem and offer comparative solutions when appropriate. The effects of polarization can function differently depending on the level of democratic and economic development that a society exists under, which may require alternative methods to address the problem. While these differences in approach are important to recognize, the effects of polarization on society remain global.

In addition to the consideration for regional and developmental differences, there is also a focus on women at the center of de-polarization solutions. The fundamental antidote to exclusionary, polarized politics is greater inclusion of a multitude of voices and perspectives. Including women and empowering female leadership has a naturally de-polarizing effect on societies. While the stabilizing effect of female leadership and general inclusion of women has been proven globally, the lack of focus on women in de-polarization efforts reflects a global shortcoming¹. For this reason, this brief focuses on the role of women in addressing the global challenge of polarization through the three pressing trends: disinformation and historical memory, societal distrust, and economic inequality.

Background

Polarization is both the cause and effect of societal division. As people retreat further into their groups, it becomes easier to demonize the out-groups, leading to further hatred and division. In democracies, social and political polarization prevent effective governance, leading to a worsening of economic and social circumstances that will in turn further erode the legitimacy of status-quo and liberal norms such as inclusion, freedom of speech and debate, and even the concept of democracy. Eventually, political polarization has been shown to increase the possibility of democratic backsliding, as one side supports whatever will eradicate the other and defending democratic norms and constitutional rights is sidelined.² This effect is evident in the rise of authoritarianism and far-right political parties globally.

Over the past couple decades, autocracy has become more prevalent around the world. In 2025, it was widely reported that Autocracies outnumbered Democracy for the first time in decades.³ Even in Democratic countries, support for anti-pluralist, far right parties has grown even in democratic bastions such as the United States, France, and the UK. These parties champion exclusionary, divisive politics that seek to divide people based on narrow definitions of what counts as an ‘in group.’ This trend has become increasingly threatening for pluralistic societies championing political and human rights for all. Scholarship has shown that while vibrant and active political differences can be healthy for democracy, mobilizing voters to support their chosen political party, there is a fine line between healthy differences and deliberately drawing divides between groups.⁴ Recognizing the relationship between rising autocracy and polarization globally is necessary to understand the threat polarization and its trends have on the global democratic system.

This brief identifies several key patterns in polarization today including feedback loops, in-groups, vs out-groups, and “us vs them” mentality. These patterns are present among all three trends addressed in this brief demonstrating the joint effect they have on polarization as a global problem. Additionally, these trends are part of a larger network of factors which interact with polarization and each other further complicating the steps to depolarization. While the impact of other trends and issues is acknowledged, this brief specifically focuses on recommendations and solutions relating to the three trends identified.

Trends & Recommendations

This brief identifies three trends that, in relationship with polarization, pose an imminent threat to the global democratic system. Based on these trends, three corresponding recommendations are offered to facilitate depolarization thus reducing the threat polarization has on the global democratic system. Each recommendation includes women in solution to highlight the role women can and have played in the process of depolarization.



DISINFORMATION & HISTORICAL MEMORY

Disinformation & Historical Memory

Collective historical memory is one of the strongest and most powerful tools used by disinformation campaigns. The emotional element of historical memory is extremely useful for manipulating narratives in favor of a particular objective. It is common for people to base their contemporary politics on historical issues or events because of their emotional strength and significance. Governments, political parties, and organizations are aware of this and use it to their advantage by propagating false or misrepresented historical narratives in order to support their own political agendas. This has become a trend among political parties, particularly far-right parties, in order to build party identity.⁵ Historical narratives that encourage in vs out group dynamics, interpreting certain groups as victims or perpetrators, strengthen group bond and legitimacy. Propagating narratives that support the party's stance intensifies the "us vs them" mentality by providing a purpose for the in-group to uphold an exclusionary attitude.

The success of memory politics in uniting certain groups and dividing societies makes this a dangerous and effective polarizing device. Countries and regions all around the world face polarization due to contested historical narratives and the role they play in contemporary politics. Typically, states with authoritarian leadership, already polarized societies, or a conflict-ridden history are most at risk for this type of polarization and manipulation of memory, however any state could face this risk. Russia is particularly skilled at using history to strategically assist its own agenda. Eastern Europe and the ex-soviet sphere are often targets of this manipulation due to contested histories and conflicts in the region already present in politics. Russia uses history to divide allies like Ukraine and Poland in order to destabilize the relationship between Ukraine and western institutions like NATO and the EU. Russia has been able to exploit delicate issues between the two neighbors successfully driving a wedge between them and making cooperation even more challenging.⁶ A divide like this can originate through one specific historical memory, then run through all mainstream political topics. Issues like immigration, economic policy, healthcare, education, and others are at risk of being contaminated by deceptive historical narratives. Using emotionally charged historical memory as justification for modern political issues is especially dangerous because it leaves little room for compromise. It is difficult to come to a consensus when an enduring and unyielding historical argument is the foundation of political opinions.

In comparison to Russia and Eastern Europe, Rwanda also faces challenges in regard to memory manipulation in relation to the Rwandan genocide of 1994. After the genocide, contested official narratives became common and divided the post-conflict society. Controversy over what caused the genocide, who is to blame, specific details about the events of 1994, and the official state narrative is debated among Rwandans. Moreover, many people blame the divisive history education about the Rwandan Revolution around 1960 for the hostility between ethnic groups that eventually led to the genocide.⁷ The power of historical narrative to divide a society both before and after conflict, demonstrates the destabilizing and powerful effect of history as well as the spiral effect of contested historical narratives and polarization.

Recommendation: Promote comprehensive historical education and highlight the role of women to combat nationalist and false narratives

Most historical narratives used to encourage in vs out group political polarization rely on nationalist and patriarchal themes that appeal to a group's personal connection to historical events. These narratives, propagated by state government, political parties, or organizations, are often portrayed as the only true version of history, therefore dismissing personal experiences or intersections. To combat false polarizing historical narratives, states and societies must welcome a comprehensive understanding of history in order to connect the past to its implications in the present. One group that is devoted to sharing historical narratives to counter those engineered by the state is the Women in Black group in Serbia. This group organizes peaceful demonstrations to counter the state-sponsored narratives which seek to minimize certain atrocities and highlight others, mostly pertaining to the wars following the breakup of Yugoslavia.⁸ As women, the group focuses specifically on challenging both patriarchal narratives which attempt to deny any need for accountability and narratives which undermine the resistance and suffering of women. By rejecting falsified history and sharing these alternative stories, the Women in Black challenge Serbians to recognize how memory is weaponized to polarize their society.

The example of the Women in Black in Serbia should influence and inform efforts to depolarize by combatting false narratives. Not only is the Women in Black movement active in Serbia now, but it was first organized as resistance against the war in Bosnia. Recognizing women's roles throughout history helps to uncover some of the historical narratives buried by the state-sponsored or weaponized examples. Women's involvements in major historical events, especially those involving conflict, are often more indirect but equally impactful. It is important to recognize the peaceful, domestic, and organizational labor that is the foundation of political mobilization and historical events.⁹ When these experiences are dismissed in patriarchal narratives, the influence and power of women is ignored and dangerously forgotten. For this reason, combatting polarization due to divided memory politics must involve highlighting the role of women in critical historical events.



SOCIETAL DISTRUST

Societal Distrust

The risk of a society suffering from polarization depends heavily on the relationships and normalized dynamics among society members. Social trust, meaning citizens trust in each other, is essential to a properly functioning and healthy democracy. Democracies rely on participation and leadership by the people, therefore disconnect and distrust among people leads to instability.¹⁰ Societies that have low levels of trust among members are at greater risk of polarization, adversely, societies that suffer increasing polarization also face a decrease in trust. Recognizing this feedback loop between polarization and social distrust is important when considering the threat of both concepts on society and democracy as a whole. Growing social distrust in correlation with worsening polarization builds upon itself and also builds upon a layered global problem caused by the feedback loop between a multitude of effects of polarization. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the relationship between social distrust and polarization when identifying solutions. Optimistically, the feedback loop created by the problem can also be used to create a reactionary solution. According to the demonstrated relationship, improving low or declining levels of trust in a society will consequently decrease polarization.

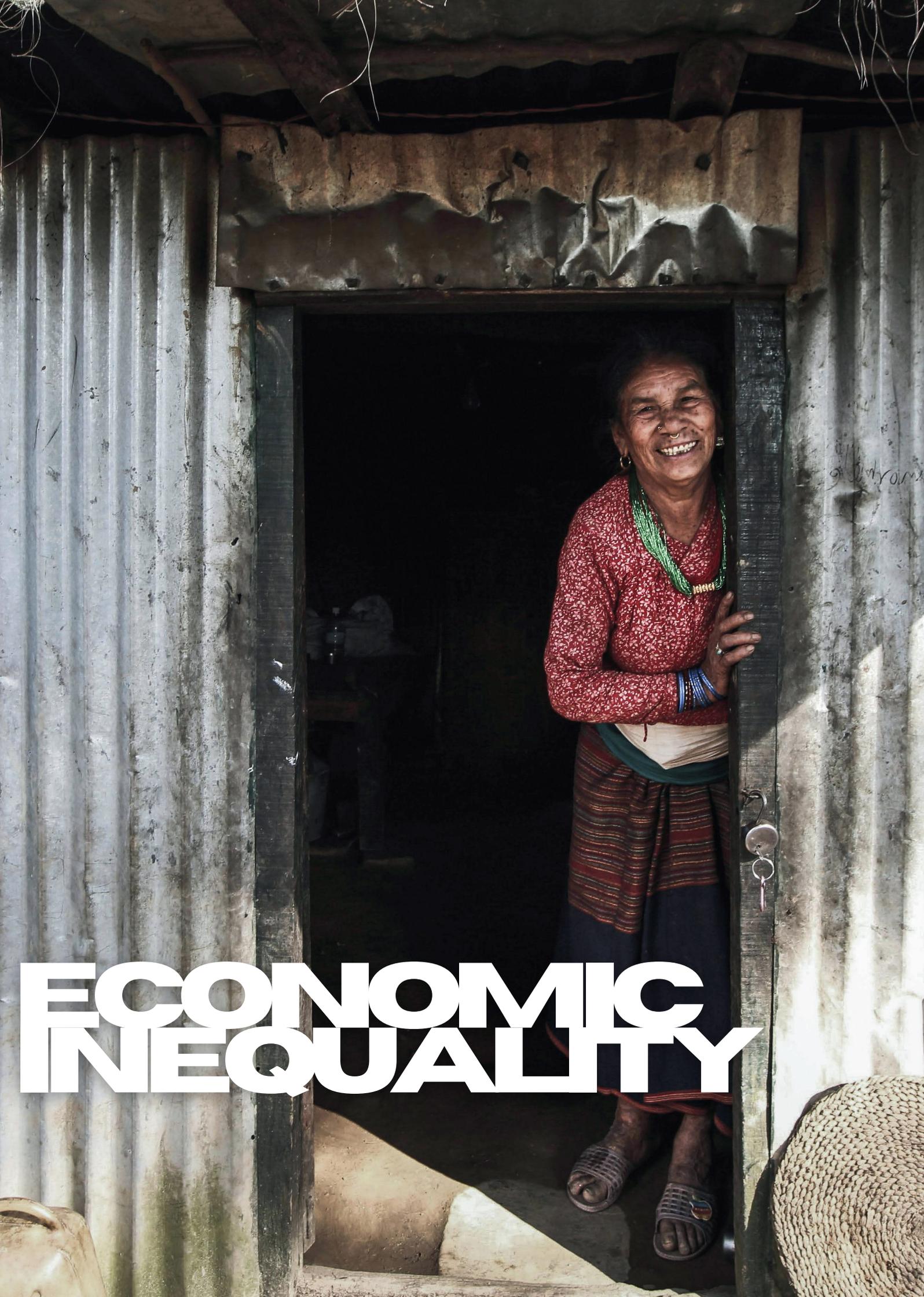
While the relationship between distrust and polarization is found based on global trends, it is still important to consider specific limitations and criteria when implementing solutions. Depending on cultural norms and behavior, certain techniques for building trust may be more effective than others. Generally, interpersonal trust levels among European societies are, as a whole, higher than in African countries.¹¹ Cultural differences linked to inequality, access to resources, underlying conflict, ethnic divisions, and unequal opportunities for women contribute to varying levels of expected trust without extreme polarization. This baseline standard and practice of trust will impact the effectiveness of certain methods or solutions. Understanding these differences and why they exist help determine the best approach for addressing low or decreasing societal trust and its relationship to polarization.

Recommendation: Improve societal trust through gender equality and promoting women in leadership

High levels of social trust have been correlated with gender equality. Societies in established democracies where men and women are treated and perceived to be equal, social trust is elevated.¹² Fairness as a value plays a fundamental role in the levels of trust people perceive. Therefore, when gender equality, understood as fairness between men and women, is prioritized people are more trusting of each other. This is particularly true in societies that have an established baseline value of fairness.¹³ In order to use this correlation to build societal unity and reduce polarization, particularly in democratic societies where fairness is valued, states should prioritize policies that promote gender equality and include women in all areas of society.

Making efforts towards greater gender equality has the potential to decrease polarization and strengthen democracy. Countries that have a high gender equality index, like Belgium or Denmark, report limited to moderate levels of polarization, while countries that have a low gender equality index, like Cyprus and Greece, report serious levels of polarization.^{14, 15} Comparing these statistics provides evidence of the connection between gender equality and lower levels of polarization. On the contrary, there are many states that enjoy high levels of gender equality yet still suffer from serious polarization. Of course, gender equality and societal trust are far from the only factors contributing to polarization so a consideration of the many other factors is necessary to establish the best solution. These contrasting cases could also encourage a critical analysis of the trust-building capacity of women in more equal societies, and why this may be limited. It may be possible that established gender equality is assumed and requires revitalization to have more positive effects.

Elevating female leadership in positive peacebuilding building initiatives, especially at the grassroots level, employs the social trust and social capital that women hold to stabilize and unify communities. Female community members leading movements and bridging connections between groups helps facilitate involvement and unification from the rest of the community who trust in these women.¹⁶ It also provides women with a leadership role in societies where they may be undervalued, reducing the divide in leadership demographics. For example, in the early 2000s in Liberia, Christian and Muslim women started a grassroots movement called “Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace”. Their activism was successful in uniting Liberian society for peace and crucial in bringing an end to the civil war in Liberia.¹⁷ As trusted members of the community, mothers and wives demanded an end to sexual violence, facilitated small disarmament, advocated for no more child soldiers, and eventually joined official peace negotiations. This example demonstrates the influence that women have as grassroots leaders, and the capability they have for fostering stability and positive peace, leading to depolarization. By supporting female leadership where it already exists and encouraging women to take leadership positions, states can improve societal stability and decrease polarization. Furthermore, supporting female-led grassroots movements allows the community to be directly involved in building solutions for their problems. This type of direct involvement increases civic engagement and trust in people's own communities which builds unity and reduces polarization.



ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Economic inequality

Economic inequality and its effects on society are a primary contributor to the rise of polarization globally. Higher levels of economic inequality increase the likelihood of polarization due to unfavorable comparison, isolation of societal groups, and a shrinking middle class.¹⁸ Awareness of increased economic inequality and the plausibility of poverty build frustration and stress causing people to place blame. Correspondingly, perception of growing economic inequality creates connection among groups with similar experiences, and resentment towards out-groups. This group classification and unity often leads to an “us vs them” mentality towards out-groups, thus increasing polarization. Another adverse effect of rising inequality is the shrinking of the middle class. A large and diverse middle class has been shown to support political stability and social connection.¹⁹ Without the middle class as a support beam, the whole of society is at risk of caving in on itself.

Economic inequality is a growing global concern, in both advanced and emerging economies.²⁰ Although economic inequality is not a new issue, its effects are emerging in new and more threatening ways. Alarming, the trend of global inequality has been linked with the global rise in populism and authoritarianism. Populist leaders exploit economic fear and anxiety to gain support and build an enemy in ‘elites’ who are blamed for not protecting the ‘ordinary people’.²¹ In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has gained support particularly in regions experiencing persistent economic disparities, especially in parts of eastern Germany that have faced slower economic development since reunification.²² AfD leaders have frequently connected economic grievances with anti-immigration rhetoric, arguing that migrants and political elites threaten economic stability and social welfare. By linking economic insecurity with identity-based political narratives, the party has been able to mobilize voters frustrated with economic inequality while simultaneously deepening political polarization within German society.²³

The threat that rising economic inequality in conjunction with rising authoritarianism poses to society is extreme polarization, which is becoming evident as both worsen. Not only does natural fear of economic instability plague societies, but now economic anxiety is being used as a weapon against certain groups. Furthermore, economic inequality between demographics aggravates the divisive potential of this trend. The gender gap in income inequality is contributing to exacerbating polarization between genders. The gender wage gap has steadily declined since 1970, however since 2005 progress towards equality has begun to slow.²⁴ This plateau, matched with growing polarization, demonstrates elements of a correlated trend that threaten the stability of democracy. Addressing the gender wage gap, as part of the broader issue of economic inequality, can help target a specific issue in order to lessen its effect on polarization as a whole.

Recommendation: Provide opportunities for storytelling to decrease class tension, specifically highlighting the experiences of women

In order to minimize the polarizing effects of economic inequality it is necessary to encourage experience sharing with the goal of decreasing class tension. Learning about experiences that differ from one's own encourages understanding and empathy. Sharing one's stories and life experiences also helps to humanize abstract ideas which fuel extreme polarization and contribute to the creation of an "us vs them" or "in-group" vs out-group" mentality.²⁵ By providing avenues for members of society to understand the circumstances and experiences of others, the polarizing effects of inequality are challenged as the knowledge gaps are narrowed. Furthermore, closing the gender wage gap and empowering women in particular to share their experiences can have an intensified effect in reducing polarization in economic inequality. Greater awareness of the economic inequality that women experience increases the opportunity for improvement, which can reduce the impact of economic inequality on polarization.

Many African countries face unique cultural, structural, educational, and other challenges when integrating women into the labor force, but overcoming these challenges is proven to be worth it in terms of economic growth. At least 9 African countries can increase their GDP by at least 20% if they are able to achieve full and equitable participation of women in the labor market.²⁶ A GDP increase of this percentage would significantly change the dynamic of economic inequality on other societal issues like polarization. The high potential for GDP growth as a result of increasing economic opportunities for women represents a positive relationship that should be applied when working to reduce polarization by addressing economic inequality.

Conclusion

The patterns identified in this brief through global trends and regional examples, demonstrate the universal challenge of polarization threatening global democracy today. Recurring themes such as feedback loops, instability, and perceived threats appeared throughout all three trends, therefore establishing the importance of their involvement in solutions to polarization. Feedback loops are often caused by the effects of extreme polarization reacting to each other. When this happens the effect causes greater polarization, therefore continuing and sometimes worsening the original effect. Moreover, instability builds anxiety and fear among people causing divisiveness. When faced with instability people seek security within familiar groups and draw away from those unfamiliar. Like instability, perceived threats cause people to retreat further into their groups and encourages an “us vs them” mentality. These themes are common elements of polarization and are deeply interwoven into the three trends discussed in this brief. Similar to these shared themes between trends, the recommendations provided also reveal parallels. Each recommendation highlights the value of women’s role in depolarization. The specific solutions and examples connect to stability, moderation, and effective leadership. Recognizing the common themes between recommendations not only demonstrates their significance, but also allows these themes to be applied to future trends in polarization. By addressing three pressing trends with a comparative regional focus on Europe and Africa and providing recommendations that center women in the solution, this brief identifies underlying themes and deconstructs them into tangible solutions. When facing an immense global challenge like polarization, it is crucial to dissect the issue in this way to manage it reasonably and with precedence. Implementing the recommendations provided should help begin to depolarize and unify societies globally.

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