GENERATION CHANGEMAKER

# INSIGHT PAPER



**SPEAK UP.**
**JUMP BEYOND THE LINE.**
**MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**

Supported by: ASHOKA

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# Foreword

Every generation inherits problems it did not create and technologies it did not choose. What has changed is how loudly young people are now insisting on a say in what comes next – not as a courtesy extended to them, but as a claim they are making on their own future.

This Insight Paper is the product of that claim. Around thirty young changemakers from eight countries spent the second half of 2026 on six issues that will define the next decade of their lives: Artificial Intelligence and Youth Participation, Gender Equality, Education System Reform, Democratic Participation, Mental Health, and Migration and Belonging. They did not do this as an academic exercise. They did it because the institutions writing the rules on these issues are, too often, doing so without the people who will live with their consequences the longest, having a say.

Six teams wrote on six subjects and arrived at one finding. Across AI, school governance and mental health, young people are consulted and nobody is obliged to answer. Across tracking, STEM and qualification recognition, background decides access before ability does. The chapters below are separate. The gap they describe is the same one, and it is a gap between what exists on paper and what reaches the people it is meant for.

Parma 2026 is not the end point of this process. It is the moment this paper is handed to the people who can act on it. What happens after is up to them - and up to the young people who will keep asking the question this paper is built around: not whether young people should be heard, but what the governors and those in power were actually able to change.

# Note from the GenC Executive Council

What began at the end of July 2026 as around thirty young changemakers from eight countries and a blank page is now six chapters, each written by people who chose to spend their evenings on it alongside studies, jobs and engagements of everyday life. Together, that adds up to hundreds of volunteer hours dedicated to the project.

The work was built in layers. We, the Council, set the direction and took the decisions. Our Editor-in-Chief turned those decisions into guidelines communicated to the six chapter editors. Each editor led a team of around three people who researched and wrote their chapter. Every team presented its vision early, then a semi-finished draft, then the finished chapter. Alongside the writing, a proofreading team went through every page, a design team built the paper you are holding and a social media team carried the project onto Instagram and TikTok.

Like most first attempts, the process taught us as much as the paper did. We designed an ambitious review structure, with peer review and several checkpoints between each draft and the Council. It proved more than a project run on volunteer evenings could sustain and the teams made up the difference: the standard of each chapter is largely their own. This came to bear in the final weeks, through late chapters, reworked sections and citation styles reconciled by hand. Next time we would design fewer checkpoints and hold every one of them.

This paper is not meant to be an end point. For each of us, it is a place to start: a topic we now know in depth, and a reason to sit down with the people who decide on it.

Our genuine thanks go to every editor and team member, to those who rebuilt, merged and proofread in the final weeks, to the design and social media teams, and to Ashoka for bringing us together. And a personal note from the Secretary General: I'm absolutely grateful for getting to work with this wonderful council throughout this process and to have been able to express-learn and define my leadership style alongside you 🧌.

***From the 2026 GenC Executive Council***
**Leander Immanuel Klinger**, Secretary General (Ashoka Austria)
**Nooshin Pourkamali**, Editor-in-Chief (Ashoka Germany)
**Leonardo Turati**, Head of Research (Ashoka Italy)
**Sofiia Stoikova**, Head of Communications (Ashoka Poland)
**Ariadna Moldoveanu**, Head of Social Media, Design & Layout (Ashoka Austria)

# CLIMATE CHANGE

There is no climate chapter in this paper and that is deliberate.

**Thousands of papers have already been written, everything has been said.**

Thirty of us chose the six following topics:



Almost nobody chose **Climate Change**. Not because we don't know about it, nor because we think it's not important, but because we know it's not enough.

Education, participation in AI and democracy, mental health, equality, human rights and peace **are not separated from environmental action**.

**They are part of the foundation that allows people to imagine a future, believe they have a place in it, and have the power to protect it.**

Tackling climate change is the first, necessary, step to obtain a World to live in.

**However, if the other issues won't be solved, then we'll just have a world in which nobody wants to live in.**



# Introduction

**Context**
Generation Changemaker 2026 is an international youth initiative convened by Ashoka, bringing together around thirty young changemakers from Belgium, Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and the United Kingdom. This Insight Paper is the initiative's central deliverable: a collaboratively produced, evidence-based publication intended for presentation in Parma in October 2026, ahead of Parma's year as European Youth Capital 2027.

**Rationale**
The six issues addressed in this paper - artificial intelligence and youth participation, gender equality, education system reform, democratic participation, mental health, and migration and belonging - were selected because each names a domain where young people are heavily affected by decisions they had little role in shaping. A youth-authored evidence base matters here specifically because the people closest to these problems are rarely the people writing the policy response to them.

**Purpose and Intended Use**
This paper is written for policymakers, educators, researchers, civil society organizations, and youth organizations who are in a position to act on its recommendations.

**Scope and Geographic Frame**
The paper's primary geographic frame is the eight countries represented by its contributing teams - Belgium, Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and the United Kingdom - with recommendations addressed at both the national and EU level where relevant. Case studies and data draw from this frame first, supplemented by wider European or international evidence where a chapter's argument requires it.

**Reading Guide**
Each of the six chapters can be read on its own or the paper can be read front to back. The Consolidated Policy Recommendations table at the end gathers every chapter's top recommendations in one place for readers who want the paper's asks without reading every chapter in full.

# Executive Summary

The six chapters of this paper were written by separate teams on separate subjects. Read together, they make one argument: **the gap is rarely a missing policy. It is the distance between what exists on paper and what actually reaches young people**. The summaries below show where each chapter locates this gap; the synthesis draws out what they have in common.

**1. AI and Youth Participation**

This chapter examines the gap between the AI Act's incoming fundamental-rights assessments and young people's right to participate in decisions about the automated systems governing their lives. It identifies two linked issues: young people are consulted on AI policy without any institutional obligation to respond, and participation is worth only what participants can contribute, which depends on preparation and on who is invited at all. Using Parma as a case study, the chapter proposes extending the city's existing Youth Test to AI systems and formalizing consultation through a Youth AI Assembly with a public, written response.

**2. Gender Equality**

At the current pace, full gender equality is still half a century away. This chapter argues that young women cannot afford to wait that long. It examines three interlocking issues: a gender health gap rooted in under-researched women's health and late diagnosis; a STEM gap that begins in early childhood and hardens into labour-market segregation; and violence against women and girls, including online abuse. It proposes youth health consultations in Parma, early STEM play and visible female mentorship, long-term programmes instead of one-off events, and prevention through education from the earliest school years that actively includes young men and boys.

**3. Education System Reform**

This chapter argues that European assessment systems, not curricula, function as the real determinant of what young people learn and how far they progress. It traces how early tracking, high-stakes single-moment exams and a shadow tutoring market convert family circumstance into academic outcome, while unprepared teachers and outdated training deepen a relational rift between educators and students that fuels disengagement and dropout. It further examines students' limited structural voice within school governance. Proposed reforms include broadening assessment formats, postponing binding tracking decisions, strengthening teachers' psycho-pedagogical training, and embedding genuine student participation and experiential, community-based learning into everyday school life.

**4. Democratic Participation**

Despite young Europeans' high engagement in informal civic activity, institutional participation remains strikingly low: turnout among under-25s in the 2024 European Parliament elections fell to 36%, and fewer than 2% of parliamentarians are under 30. This chapter identifies the structural barriers behind that paradox, including limited electoral eligibility, an unharmonised voting age and civic education that rarely builds practical political skill. It warns that unaddressed disengagement breeds distrust in democratic institutions and vulnerability to populist alternatives. The chapter proposes lowering barriers to youth representation, harmonising the voting age at 16 across Member States, and scaling interactive civic education in secondary school.

**5. Mental Health & Well-being**

This chapter situates young people's mental health within the wider systems that shape it: healthcare, digital environments, and socioeconomic and geographical circumstance. It identifies an asymmetry between how healthcare and digital platforms respond to distress, structural and financial barriers that determine whether support is actually accessible, and a persistent gap between being consulted on mental health policy and having genuine influence over it. Drawing on models such as Jigsaw Ireland and Austria's "Gesund aus der Krise", the chapter calls for sustainable investment in youth mental-health services, better data on access barriers, safer digital environments, and a shift from consultation toward co-created, implementable solutions.

**6. Migration and Belonging**

This chapter looks at migration and integration through the experiences of young people negotiating their identity between family heritage and the host society, and of communities facing rapid demographic change. It identifies three problems: barriers to identity and social acceptance; social division and public concern that can shade into prejudice and misinformation; and a mismatch between migrants' qualifications and the jobs open to them. Treating schools and intercultural education as key places of inclusion, it proposes moving from assimilation towards real belonging, improving the recognition of foreign qualifications, grounding public debate in evidence rather than assumptions, and building a shared European identity.

# Synthesis

The chapters share four patterns:

**Being heard is not being answered.** Young people are consulted on AI, on how schools are run and on mental health, and in each case nobody is obliged to respond. Student councils exist in almost every Member State and are often ignored. Three chapters land on the same remedy: a duty to state what was adopted, what was not and why. The AI chapter adds that the answer has to arrive before the decision, not after it. Denmark already does this: its climate minister is legally required to reply to a youth-led climate council. *(Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5)*

**Background decides access before ability does.** Two students who have learned the same end up on different paths when one is sorted into a lower school track at age ten and her family cannot afford tutoring. In Austria, girls match boys in mathematics and still leave technical subjects. Across the EU, 47% of immigrants with a university degree are unemployed or working below their qualifications, against 30% of the native-born. Mental health support exists, but not for those who cannot pay or live far from a service. Participation is filtered the same way: hackathons, forums and exchanges mostly reach the young people already equipped to find them. *(Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6)*

**Instruments exist but do not count.** Micro-credentials, short certified courses outside the formal curriculum, carry no weight next to the final exam. The EU mental health framework sets no binding waiting times. What does work often runs on short-term money: Austria's free youth mental health programme is funded until June 2027, an Austrian prevention NGO had its funding cut in April 2026 and Italian anti-dropout projects depend on public tenders that expire. Reform without a legal anchor can be undone, as Poland showed in 2017 when it reversed its own school tracking reform. *(Chapters 2, 3 and 5)*

**The measures that hold up put the load on the institution.** They reach young people through places everyone passes through anyway, usually schools, instead of waiting for them to sign up. They also ask the institution to change rather than the individual. Germany's Kickfair runs its youth dialogue through schools. Zurich's QUIMS programme gives extra resources to schools rather than to individual students. The education chapter wants exam accommodations built into every exam instead of granted as exceptions. *(Chapters 1, 3 and 6)*

**In short: young people in Europe are not short of invitations to speak. What is missing is the duty to answer them and the legal force and funding to make that answer hold.** The following six chapters show where you can find these gaps.

# Methodology

**Research Approach**
Each chapter combines three sources of evidence: a literature review of academic research, institutional reports, and policy documents; comparative country case studies (one to two per chapter); and, where available, youth-sourced primary input gathered through surveys, interviews, or workshops.

**Cross-Country Collaboration Model**
The GenC Executive Council set the paper's direction. The Editor-in-Chief translated it into guidelines for six chapter editors, each of whom led a team of around three contributors. Teams presented their vision for the chapter, then a semi-finished draft, then the finished chapter, which a separate team proofread before design and compilation.

**Data Sources**
Factual claims in this paper are referenced to their sources.. Where evidence on a point central to a chapter's argument was thin, chapters were instructed to say so explicitly rather than present a weak source with false confidence.

**Limitations**
This paper's evidence base is geographically weighted toward Western and Central Europe, reflecting the composition of its contributing teams; findings should not be read as representative of youth experience across the whole of Europe, let alone globally. As a volunteer-run project completed over several months, its primary research is narrower in scale than a funded institutional study, and case studies were selected for relevance and evidentiary strength rather than random or representative sampling.

**Ethical Considerations**
Where chapters draw on youth testimony or survey data, informed consent was obtained from participants and identifying details anonymized unless a participant explicitly consented to attribution. No chapter presents invented or composite testimony as real - the chapter opening stories are episodes from a fictional Interrail journey that runs through the whole paper.

# AI &Youth Participation

AI is shaping our future,
but are young people shaping AI?

# THE INTERRAIL STORY

After I had stepped out of the train station into sunny Copenhagen and left my backpack at the hostel, I wanted to take a short walk around the area to grab some dinner. I decided to eat in a rather quiet restaurant with only two other guests that evening. One of them immediately came over to my table with a friendly smile and introduced herself.

Lilly – a warm and incredibly kind person – studies philosophy at the University of Copenhagen and participated in an AI event at her university just a week ago. Initially, she felt uncomfortable as one of the only students without a technical background. Lilly felt like she didn't belong in the AI discussion and had nothing to say, but then people also talked about the ethical and philosophical aspects of AI, and her field became very relevant.

At that moment, Lilly became curious and started participating in the debates. Turns out, the event wasn't about coding at all, but about how AI should be influenced by young people from different fields – because AI is used by all of them, and very few young people actually have a voice in AI governance processes.

Lilly was frustrated that only a few students, especially women, from other departments participated. I assume that's because many believe they don't have enough experience ...



# AI & YOUTH PARTICIPATION

This chapter uses **artificial intelligence** as defined by the EU AI Act: a machine-based system operating with some degree of autonomy that infers from its input how to generate outputs such as predictions, recommendations or decisions affecting people and their environment (European Parliament & Council, 2024). We narrow it down to systems **deployed by public authorities**, because those are the systems a city controls and can be asked to govern differently.

Europe is writing the rules for these systems now. The AI Act took effect in 2024, and from **December of 2027** public bodies deploying high-risk systems must assess their impact on fundamental rights beforehand. Decisions taken in this period will set defaults that will shape the future, yet the people who will live with those defaults longest are the least represented in making them.

What is being settled is not only technical. As these systems take over judgements that were previously made by people, what should remain a human decision becomes a political question rather than an engineering problem. A system can be more consistent than an official yet it should not make decisions on behalf of the people it affects.

The instruments, meanwhile, run on separate tracks. Assessment duties address administrations, participation instruments address citizens – and nothing obliges the first to take account of the second. This chapter argues that **participation in AI governance should be structural not occasional** and that Parma is particularly well placed to show what that means. We propose that the city extend its existing **Youth Test** to cover AI systems, organise the consultation stage as a **Youth AI Assembly** prepared through the AI literacy infrastructure it already runs, and commit to responding in writing to what it hears.

## Focus Areas

**1 Youth as Structural Co-Shapers, Not Observers**

Young people are consulted about AI and rarely able to change the outcome, and the legal duties now do not close that gap.

**2 Inclusive AI Literacy and Interdisciplinary Youth Participation**

A place at the table is worth only what a participant can make out of it, which depends on preparation and on who is invited in the first place.

## Youth as Structural Co-Shapers, Not Observers

Young people are regularly consulted on policies regarding artificial intelligence, but they are rarely allowed to shape them. An opinion that is heard and then set aside is not participation in any meaningful sense. It is closer to a formality. A 2026 scoping review finds a persistent gap between young people's widespread exposure to AI systems and their limited influence in the decision-making processes that govern them (Lalande et al., 2026).

Parma makes the gap concrete. The city evaluates its policies for generational impact across four areas (education, employment, inclusion and wellbeing) and none of them are technological. A municipality can therefore assess its policies carefully for how they affect young people while the automated systems it deploys pass through no such check.

This chapter measures participation against Lundy's framework of space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007). The first two describe the right to speak, the latter two the right to be heard and to change the outcome. Co-shaping requires all four. Lundy developed the framework as an interpretation of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which treats participation as a right rather than a favour institutions may grant. It names children specifically, but the logic is not only limited to them. We argue that those who will live longest with a decision have the strongest right to shape it.

Exposure is not the problem. The same review documents how extensively young people encounter and engage with AI systems (Lalande et al., 2026). What is missing is the second half of participation – and where a city deploys an AI system that affects young residents, the missing half becomes an accountability gap.

### Causes

This gap does not result from any unwillingness on the part of young people (Lalande et al., 2026). It comes instead from how participation is designed. Most formats offered to young people extend an invitation to speak, which in Lundy's terms covers space and voice, while audience and influence remain with the institutions running the process.

Measured against the four conditions, such formats fall short from the outset, because whatever young people say leaves the actual decision untouched.

A second cause is that the legal duties now being introduced were not written with participation in mind. From December 2027, public bodies deploying high-risk AI must assess its impact on fundamental rights before doing so − a duty the Digital Omnibus postponed from August 2026 (European Parliament & Council, 2024, 2026). The assessment attaches to the deploying authority. Nothing in it requires that authority to consult the people the system will affect, and young people are not named as a group whose position must be considered.

## Consequences

When participation stops at consultation, the generation most exposed to AI systems ends up with the least say over how they are governed. The 2026 review concludes that integrating youth participation into AI governance and education may contribute to more inclusive and developmentally informed technological ecosystems (Lalande et al., 2026). The cost of exclusion is that decisions about AI get made without the perspective of the people who will live with their consequences the longest. At the level of the individual the consequence follows from the same absence. If no duty requires a public body to consult those its system affects, then a person on the receiving end of an automated decision has no easy way to achieve that outcome. The lasting harm is not a single adverse decision but one that cannot be seen, learned from or contested.

## Countermeasures in Act

Europe has begun to write this into institutions rather than declarations. The Council of Europe's Youth Department adopted a Declaration on Youth Participation in AI Governance in 2020, which frames the absence of young people from AI governance as a denial of their right to participate in democratic processes and calls on national, regional and local authorities to recognise them as rightful stakeholders alongside AI experts and industry representatives (Council of Europe, 2020).

A working example exists at European level. The European Commission's Young Citizens' Assembly on Pollinators randomly selected 100 young people aged 18 to 29 from all 27 member states to develop biodiversity-governance recommendations through 2025 and 2026. Because members are drawn by lot, it functions as a representative mini-public rather than an open, self-selecting forum (BioAgora, 2025).

Parma has an instrument the assessment duty does not provide. On 17 January 2024 the city adopted the Youth Test by council resolution, making it mandatory for the administration to evaluate the impact of public policies on reducing the generational gap. The test is designed as an ex-ante instrument combining evaluation, monitoring and consultation of the youth sector. A Youth Test Group inside the administration runs it, with members of the Youth Commission taking part. The procedure moves from a survey of young people, through focus groups between them and the administration, to a public communication phase. The Youth Commission itself was established by the City Council, which launched an open call in May 2023 and selected 27 young residents, and it has grown since (Comune di Parma, 2024b). What the test does not reach is artificial intelligence. It assesses policy, not the automated systems a municipality deploys.

## Solutions and Positions to Take

Parma consults young people through the Youth Test and hears them through the Youth Commission, and from December 2027 it will have to assess its AI systems for fundamental-rights impact in any case. What no instrument in this chapter establishes is an obligation for the administration to answer what it hears in a form the people who said it can see. That obligation is what turns being heard into having influence, and it applies on two levels: towards the group that recommends and towards the individual who challenges a decision made about them.

## Two measures would put it in place.

**First, extend the Youth Test to AI systems.** Parma already assesses public policy for its generational impact, and the same test should apply before the city deploys an AI system that affects young residents. Because both assessments are ex ante and both precede a decision by the administration, the fundamental-rights assessment required from December 2027 and the Youth Test can be conducted as a single procedure. This widens the scope of a mechanism the city already operates rather than building a new one, and the Youth Test Group already exists to carry it. What the extension adds is a written response to the findings of the consultation phase. How that phase should be organised, and who should be in it, is the subject of Issue 2.

**Second, a public register of municipal AI systems that also explains how to challenge each one.** Two fields should be standard for every entry. Who a system affects, and how a person can contest its decisions, written in plain language. Any city deploying AI in public services can do this, and Parma could publish one by the second quarter of 2027. The city holds the European Youth Capital title in 2027, which puts both measures in the year it has already committed to youth participation.

## Inclusive AI Literacy and Interdisciplinary Youth Participation

Meaningful youth participation in AI governance depends not only on whether young people are invited, but on whether they have enough knowledge to understand and question what they are being asked to shape. If young participants enter discussions about AI systems without a basic understanding of how those systems work, the difference in knowledge between them and the technical or institutional experts around them can become a difference in influence.

AI literacy is meant to reduce that imbalance. The OECD and European Commission describe it as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that allows learners to understand how AI systems work, critically evaluate their outputs and make informed decisions about their opportunities and risks (OECD/European Commission, 2026). UNESCO takes a similarly broad approach, combining technical knowledge with a human-centred mindset, ethics and AI system design rather than treating programming as the centre of AI education (UNESCO, 2024).

This distinction matters for participation. A young person does not need to understand how to train a neural network before asking whether an automated decision is fair, whether certain data should be collected or whether an AI system should be used at all. Technical expertise answers one set of questions, but legal knowledge, social science, ethics, political judgement and lived experience answer others. Research on participatory AI argues that meaningful participation must take different forms of knowledge seriously instead of treating technical expertise as the only relevant kind (Birhane et al., 2022). AI literacy should therefore make participation easier to achieve, not create an additional prerequisite.

## Causes

Starting conditions are unequal. Young people are often described as digital natives, but familiarity with smartphones, social media or generative AI does not automatically translate into digital competence.

The International Computer and Information Literacy Study assessed more than 130,000 students across 35 education systems. On average, only around half reached at least Level 2 in computer and information literacy, the level at which students demonstrate a basic independent understanding of computer use. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds achieved higher results in both computer and information literacy and computational thinking across participating countries (Fraillon, 2025).

Frequent use does not mean understanding. Someone may use a generative AI system every day without knowing why it can produce false information, how training data affects its outputs, how bias emerges or what happens to information entered into the system.

Participation formats add a second barrier. Hackathons are practical, collaborative and focused on concrete problems, but the word itself and the usual emphasis on prototypes and technological solutions can signal that coding is expected before a participant even applies.

A student of computer science may immediately recognise such an event as a space in which their skills are valuable. Someone studying politics, philosophy, law, sociology or art may reasonably assume it is not intended for them. Yet many of the questions surrounding AI governance are precisely political, social or ethical ones.

Whether predictive systems should be used by public authorities, what data a city should collect, how citizens should be informed or when a non-AI solution might be preferable cannot be decided through technical optimisation alone. Exclusion therefore happens through self-selection without anyone formally being refused a place.

Birhane et al. (2022) describes a related problem inside the process. Participation can reproduce existing power differences when technical actors define the problem, the vocabulary and the range of possible solutions before other participants enter. In that case people may be invited to contribute while having little opportunity to question the assumptions the project rests on. Terminology works in the same direction. Terms such as model training, hallucination, automated decision-making, and explainability are familiar to some participants and new to others, and if they are not explained they distribute confidence unevenly.



## Consequences

The representation problem remains invisible. A youth participation process on AI may include many participants and still represent a narrow section of young people if most come from similar educational backgrounds or were already interested in technology. An institution can truthfully say that young people participated while those with the least previous access to AI knowledge remain absent. This becomes self-reinforcing. Young people who already understand AI are more likely to join such events, gain further knowledge, meet relevant organisations and participate again, so a knowledge gap develops into a participation gap.

Policy narrows with it. When participation is dominated by technical backgrounds, discussion moves quickly towards how an AI system should be built or improved rather than whether it should be used at all, what problem it is meant to solve or what alternatives exist. Birhane et al. (2022) warn that participatory AI loses much of its value when participation takes place only after the fundamental direction of a project has been decided. Diversity on a participant list does not guarantee comparable influence either. This matters because many contributions AI governance needs are not technical answers. A participant may know that a proposed municipal service would be difficult for young migrants to use, or that an automated procedure misunderstands how an institution actually works. That is expertise too, even if it cannot be expressed in code.

## Countermeasures in Act

International frameworks already reject the idea that AI literacy means learning to code. UNESCO's AI Competency Framework for Students presents students as responsible users and potential co-creators of AI rather than passive consumers, and places a human-centred mindset and the ethics of AI alongside technical competence (UNESCO, 2024). The OECD and European Commission followed with the AI Literacy Framework for Primary and Secondary Education in June 2026, which is written for general education rather than a specialist computer science curriculum and therefore treats AI literacy as something developed across subjects and educational backgrounds (OECD/European Commission, 2026).

The European Union has begun to institutionalise AI literacy in law. Article 4 of the AI Act requires providers and deployers of AI systems to take measures to support AI literacy among staff and other people dealing with the operation and use of those systems on their behalf, taking account of differences in technical knowledge, experience, education and training (European Parliament & Council, 2024). This does not reach the participation problem. Article 4 concerns people providing, deploying or operating AI systems, and it gives no young citizen who wants to take part in an AI governance process a corresponding claim to preparation beforehand. The competency frameworks provide content without determining how a city should connect AI education to democratic participation.

Parma has the local infrastructure to make that connection. In 2024 the Comune di Parma approved participation in a regional programme on the responsible use of social media and artificial intelligence among young people. The municipal documentation describes workshops with schools on responsible AI use, sets out further activities combining practical learning with critical reflection on ethical questions, and connects digital literacy programmes in municipal libraries to reducing educational disadvantage (Comune di Parma, 2024a).

This has developed into the AI Microlearning Tour in Parma and its province, which begins with a self-assessment of participants' existing AI knowledge and then provides twelve hours of online training covering how the systems work, bias, hallucinations, privacy and ethical use. The project is directed particularly towards young people from vulnerable backgrounds and vocational pathways, and participants who complete the training can become ambassadors in a twelve-stop roadshow around the province (Galleria dei Pensieri APS, 2026). Parma therefore does not need to create an AI literacy programme from zero. What is missing is the connection between that educational infrastructure and the consultation the city is obliged to carry out.

## Solutions and Positions to Take

The Youth Test described in Issue 1 already contains a consultation phase in which young people and the administration meet before a decision is MADE. If that phase is extended to AI systems, it becomes the point at which two things are decided: who is in the room and how they can act. The consultation phase for AI systems should therefore be organised as a Youth AI Assembly, governed by three conditions. AI literacy belongs inside the process rather than being used as a condition for entering it. The objective is not for every participant to reach the same technical level, but for everyone to have enough common knowledge to follow the discussion, ask questions and recognise where their own knowledge is relevant.

First, a short common AI literacy programme should precede the Assembly and any hackathon connected to it. It should require no previous coding experience and should not be used to rank or select participants. Parma could adapt the structure of its existing AI Microlearning Tour rather than creating a separate programme, beginning with a self-assessment and continuing with a shortened common module on how AI systems work, where they are used, why errors and bias occur, what happens to data and what ethical and political choices remain open. The programme should use local cases, for example whether AI should answer citizen enquiries or assist with public-service decisions, which also makes it easier to show where technical questions end and political choices begin.

Second, interdisciplinarity should be built into recruitment and group formation. Open registration alone is unlikely to produce the range of perspectives needed. Parma should recruit through secondary schools, vocational schools, university faculties across different disciplines, youth organisations, cultural organisations and youth centres rather than relying mainly on technology networks. The same principle should continue inside the process, with working groups deliberately bringing together participants of different backgrounds. The expectation of broad expertise should apply to the group as a whole, not to every individual participant. This also distinguishes the Assembly from the Youth Commission, which was filled through a single open call and which Issue 1 relies on for continuity rather than diversity.

Third, Parma should broaden what counts as a valid outcome. If success is measured mainly by whether participants produce an application or technical prototype, technical skills remain structurally more valuable even where the process is formally interdisciplinary. A group might build a prototype, but it could equally design a citizen challenge procedure, an AI transparency notice, a bias-testing framework, rules for municipal procurement or a proposal explaining why an AI system should not be deployed in a particular case. The question should be whether the proposal addresses the problem well, not how much code it contains. This connects directly to the register proposed in Issue 1. A challenge procedure that is written but not understood provides no accountability, and the people best placed to say whether it is understandable are the ones it is written for.

## From Observers to Co-Shapers

**Linkback**

The two issues describe one failure at different points. Young people can be consulted about AI systems without any obligation on the institution to respond. The assessment arriving in December 2027 does not change this, because it addresses the deploying authority and requires no consultation of those the system affects. Even a well-designed process then fails if participants arrive unprepared, or if the format quietly selects those who already have the preparation.

Measured against Lundy's four conditions, European practice supplies **space** and **voice** and stops. **Audience** requires that someone be obliged to answer. **Influence** requires that the answer arrive before the decision, not after. Parma already has the instrument that sits at that point in the process.

## Call to Action

### Extend the Youth Test to AI systems

The **City Council** would decide, as it did in January 2024. The **Youth Test Group** would carry it out, running the assessment jointly with the fundamental-rights assessment required from December 2027, since both are ex ante and precede the same decision.

### Organise the consultation stage as a Youth AI Assembly

The **Youth Test Group** and **Youth Commission** would design it, building preparation on the **AI Microlearning Tour** and recruiting through schools, vocational **schools, university faculties, youth organisations and youth centres** rather than technology networks alone.

### Commit to a written response

The **Comune di Parma** would answer the Assembly's recommendations publicly and in writing, stating what it adopted, what it did not and why. No existing instrument in this chapter provides this, and it is what turns consultation into influence.

### Publish a register of municipal AI systems

Publish a register of municipal AI systems, with two fields standard for every entry: who a system affects, and how to contest its decisions, in plain language. Whether the language is plain is something the Assembly is well placed to test.

Parma holds the title of **European Youth Capital 2027**, and the assessment duty begins in December of that year. The two dates coincide once.

# COUNTRY CASE STUDY – GERMANY

## Routing Youth Voice Through Existing Institutions – Kickfair's DEMOKRATIEdialog as a Model for Structural Participation in AI Governance



The solution analyzed is Kickfair's DEMOKRATIEdialog format, developed by Ashoka Fellow Steffi Biester (Fellow since 2019). In this format, secondary school students moderate structured dialogue sessions and present their perspectives directly to members of the Bundestag and Landtag, mayors, and civil-society actors, on equal footing rather than as an invited add-on panel.

The format has been applied across Germany through Kickfair's existing civic-education network, reaching students through their schools rather than through opt-in youth councils or competitions. A concrete recent instance took place in June 2026, when a DEMOKRATIEdialog session in Bochum brought together students, Bundestag and Landtag members, a mayor, and civil-society representatives. The model has diffused as part of Kickfair's broader civic-education work, which is built to be repeated across school partnerships rather than run as a one-off event.



### Starting points

Before this kind of format, youth engagement with German policymakers largely followed a consultative model: young people were invited to react to decisions and agendas already framed by adults, which corresponds to what Laura Lundy's participation framework calls "voice" without "influence."

Existing participation formats also tended to be self-selecting: youth councils, competitions, and similar opt-in structures mainly reached students who were already civically engaged or digitally confident, leaving out those who would not actively seek out such opportunities. Ashoka Fellow Maximilian Oehl (Brand New Bundestag, Fellow since 2022) has separately argued that this exclusion is compounded in AI governance specifically, since officials themselves are often structurally unequipped to regulate AI, meaning the people most equipped to weigh in on AI policy are missing from the room on both sides.

## Contribution to the issue

The clearest evidence of impact is qualitative: following the June 2026 session, a teacher noted that ninth-graders had "taught a mayor." This is Lundy's "influence" criterion realised in practice, students' input visibly shaped how an elected official understood an issue, rather than being received and set aside.

Because DEMOKRATIEdialog is routed through existing school structures rather than opt-in application, it structurally reaches students who would not otherwise self-select into civic participation, directly addressing the representativeness gap described in the starting point.

The format's trajectory so far is democracy-education in general, not AI governance specifically. Its future contribution to AI & Youth Participation depends on whether the same non-self-selecting structure is extended to AI-specific policy questions, where both the youth-exclusion gap and the official-literacy gap identified by Oehl are most acute.

## What can be learned and scaled

The transferable design principle is the delivery mechanism, not the topic: routing participation through existing institutions that all young people already pass through (schools), rather than through opt-in formats, is what avoids self-selection. This principle should be considered by any future project aiming for representative rather than self-selected youth participation.

A limitation should be named directly: DEMOKRATIEdialog builds civic voice and influence, but it does not on its own build AI literacy. Ashoka Fellow Anne Kjær Bathel's ReDI School model, free AI, machine learning, and data-analytics training specifically for groups otherwise excluded from technical education, addresses the literacy gap that Kickfair's format does not.

The scalable recommendation is therefore a synthesis rather than either model alone: pairing a non-self-selecting participation structure (Kickfair's school-based delivery) with genuine technical literacy provision (ReDI School's training model) would address both the representation gap and the literacy gap simultaneously. This combined structure could be replicated in other countries by identifying an equivalent universal institutional touchpoint (schools, mandatory civic-education programs) and pairing it with a free, targeted AI-literacy track for groups typically excluded from technical education.

# Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment

Equal opportunities. Stronger voices. A fairer future.

# THE INTERRAIL STORY

During my stay in Slovakia, I met Adam at a tiny bar on a rainy night. While we started with small talk about where we're from and what brought us there, the conversation slowly turned more meaningful. I'm probably going to remember it for a long time, since I would've never expected something like it.

Just to capture it quickly here as well:
Adam was telling me about how he started doing his current awareness job, about how it bothered him so much seeing the women around him not being treated with the respect and dignity they deserve − essential values to ensure gender equality.

Apparently, the gender pay gap is really prominent in Slovakia when compared to other European countries. But their career isn't the only area in life where women face disadvantage. Since female patients don't get the same credibility as male ones do, women's health desperately needs improving as well. Another main issue is the lack of safety and in the worst cases even violence against women.

All the mentioned aspects, and more, made Adam step up as a man and advocate for women, which I think is great!



# GENDER EQUALITY & WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF GENDER EQUALITY? NO TIME TO WAIT.

More than a century. This is how long the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report estimates it will take for the world to reach full gender parity based on current progress (World Economic Forum, 2026). 120 more years before girls and women feel safe, acknowledged and respected in personal and professional life. 120 more years before young women feel empowered to pursue their dreams without fear of being judged or discriminated against. 120 more years before no woman feels the pain of violence in any capacity. But will it really be 'only' 120 more years? With the dynamically changing state of the world, uncertain socioeconomic and geopolitical global situation and emergence of new powerful technologies, 10, 20 or 120 years is not the time to wait and see what happens.

That is why we act now. Over the years, women have consistently been mistreated and undervalued in areas where their contributions have meant the most − from being the leaders of scientific innovations to domestic labour and childcare. Despite progress in gender equality across the EU, inequalities between Member States remain (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2026), resulting in multiple gender gaps across disciplines. The European Commission committed to decreasing the discrepancies by adopting the Gender Equality strategy 2026-2030 in March 2026. By 2030 the Commission pledges to have strengthened action in key areas relevant for women: women's health, cyberviolence, as well as employment and education. It also aims to ensure that a gender-sensitive EU funding strategy is in place − one which will improve access to funding for female entrepreneurs, ensure greater female representation in finance and SUPPORT the development of digital and financial literacy among young women (European Commission, 2026).

This chapter of the Insight Paper provides a vital youth perspective on gender equality, which complements the intersectional and cross-gender approach of the Gender Equality strategy. In addition to focusing on three areas, Women's Health, Violence Against Women and Gender STEM gap, the chapter will provide insight into how the matters impact on young women and affect their prospects for personal and professional growth.

## Focus Areas

### 1 Women's Health

Women's health is a systematically under-served and under-researched area, which directly impacts ON women's wellbeing. From inequality in clinical trial inclusion and lack of female-focused research data, to medical malpractice and disregard for pain, women are required to fight for their health, instead of it being able to prosper.

### 2 Gender STEM Gap

The impact of education on decreasing societal barriers, improving quality of life and empowering individuals is undeniable. However, societal bias, male-dominated environment and high dropout rates from educational institutions lead to the strengthening of education and skill gaps, particularly in STEM related fields, preventing women from achieving their full potential.

### 3 Violence Against Women and Girls

Violence against women takes many forms – from mental and emotional to verbal, physical and sexual, occurring online or at home, and committed by strangers or loved ones. Yet, no form of violence is acceptable. Despite being the EU's top gender equality concern, violence against women remains widespread, often stigmatised and hidden from view.

## Women's Health

Imagine: the main water supply pipe at your house has burst – yet again. You've been waiting for the water to stop for two days now, with no success. The living room is getting flooded, but the only thing you have on hand is a band-aid – not nearly big or absorbent enough to stop all that flow.

But how can that be, the band-aid package said it could stop a waterfall! Frustrated from having to change the damp band-aids every hour, you call the plumber. They are busy and tell you to wait, maybe go for a walk. The pipe will 'fix itself' in a few days.

The above is far from imagination for women and individuals who menstruate. This crude and extended metaphor is how systems view their health.

Specifically, it illustrates the fact that period product absorbency has only been properly studied recently, resulting in years of possible misdiagnosis of heavy flow (DeLoughery, 2023).

Or that diagnostic and therapeutic potential of period blood has so far been overlooked in research (Rashmi, 2026).

Or that women's car safety has been dependent on male physique, with the first female crash test dummy developed only 4 years ago (Karemyr et al., 2022; Pedersen, 2022; Linder, Kullgren and Svensson, 2025). Gender bias in healthcare is a prominent issue, affecting millions yearly, with women more likely to face financial and structural barriers to accessing medical care than men (Hervey and Horton, 2026).

## Causes

The root causes of gender inequality in studying and diagnosing women's health stem from the systemic omission of women-centric data in medical and scientific research (Merone et al., 2022). This has led female patients to experience late diagnosis of medical conditions, poorer understanding and awareness of issues across a woman's lifespan and low quality or poorly targeted treatment (Jeffrey, 2025).

Factors exacerbating the gender health gap include: intersectional discrimination, gendered social role division, limiting workplace policies that prevent leave-taking when, for instance, one is in extreme pain, toxic work environment, financial obstacles, high cost of quality healthcare, as well as taboo and menstrual stigma prevalent in society from early adolescence (Åkerman, 2024; Vipul, 2024; Jeffrey, 2025).

## Consequences

The health gender gap results in both psychological and physical consequences on women's wellbeing, perception of self and quality of life. Research shows that although women tend to live longer than men, they spend more years in poor health (Department of Health and Social Care, 2026; Muszynska-Spielauer et al., 2026). For instance, in the United Kingdom between 2019-21 and 2022-24 the number of years women spend in good health dropped by a striking 2.5 years (Office for National Statistics, 2026), particularly in regions outside of London. This points to uneven access to medical care and the relationship between wealth and living in good health (Office for National Statistics, 2026). Moreover, in recent years the time women have to wait on average for a gynaecology appointment has more than doubled in the United Kingdom (Department of Health and Social Care, 2026), putting women's health at risk, as well as slowing down the time OF diagnosis of potential reproductive system cancers, as well as endometriosis.

Women systematically face longer times for diagnoses than men (Sun, 2023), particularly regarding cardiovascular disease, which despite being a major cause of death among women in the European Union (Eurostat, 2026; European Society of Cardiology, n.d.) is also often not treated adequately (Department of Health and Social Care, 2026). Additionally, the current average time it takes for a woman to be diagnosed with endometriosis after first flagging the symptoms to a doctor is more than 9 years (Department of Health and Social Care, 2026). This equates to 9 years (often even more) spent in excruciating pain, which has a significant impact on personal life and professional activity, during which women wait for an official diagnosis in order to be treated seriously by various systems. The medical struggle does not end with finally obtaining a diagnosis − women are also misdiagnosed more often than men, with their symptoms often attributed to anxiety and stress rather than real lived experience (Harrilal-Mahara, 2025).

It is important to note that most research has looked into adult women when researching the gender health gap (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017; Schmitz and Lazarevič, 2020; Muszynska-Spielauer, 2026) with little focus on the younger age range. However, it is important to note the perspectives of the youth as research suggests that more young women aged 15-24 than men believe that they are treated more poorly by the medical system and healthcare staff compared to men (Karapetyan, 2025; Iribarren, 2025). Last but not least, it is crucial to consider the fast developing technological advancements, such as Artificial Intelligence and their role in furthering the gender health gap. There is a real risk of AI being trained on data where women are not represented adequately, leading to further exacerbation of gender biases further through algorithms. Therefore, it is crucial to promptly and holistically address the gender bias and medical gender gap to ensure gender equality within the healthcare sector and a life in good health for all.

## Current Solutions and Proposed Actions

Achieving gender equality in women's health means achieving health equality for all. It is crucial to act now and raise awareness about the gender health gap from early years. Therefore, the following actions are proposed:

### Call to Action



**Youth Health Consultations**

As part of Parma being the European Youth Capital 2027, healthcare institutions in the city are encouraged to hold 'youth health' consultations, providing space for the youth to engage in conversations about health and gender equality within the medical system.



**Research on Gender Bias**

It is encouraged that a comprehensive study of attitudes of young women (up to the age of 25) towards gender bias in healthcare is conducted, to fill the niche in current academic research and to gain a deeper perspective on the actions to be taken to decrease inequality.



**Education & Awareness**

Raising awareness and engaging in conversations about gender bias in healthcare in educational settings, both during early stages of education, as well as at higher institutions, is crucial to ensure that young women are not dismissed when confiding about health symptoms to peers, educators, parents, institutions and healthcare professionals.

## Gender STEM Gap

The Gender STEM Gap is not an innate biological deficit in cognitive or technical aptitude. Instead, it represents a cumulative opportunity and confidence gap that develops across a woman's lifetime − originating in early childhood and socialisation with peers, expanding through education, and solidifying into systemic polarisation of the labor market (Bergmann, Nikolatti and Sorger, 2025).

With the European Union targeting 20 million Information and communications Technology (ICT) specialists by 2030 under the EU Digital Decade Framework (Council of the European Union, n.d.), the persistent exclusion of female talent from technical fields creates an acute macroeconomic bottleneck.

## Causes

Multiple, interacting factors determine the extent of girls' and women's involvement in STEM and educational achievement. Such factors have been categorised by UNESCO (2017) into: those stemming from the individual, for instance one's psychological readiness; factors mediated by family and peers, such as expectations; factors driven by the school environment, for instance teaching approach and education curricula; as well as society-level factors, for example gender stereotypes and traditional role division (UNESCO, 2017). The divergence in STEM interest, as well as opportunities begins in early development. Meta-analyses confirm that gender-typed toy preferences emerge between 9 and 32 months (Todd, Barry and Thommessen, 2016; Todd et al., 2017). Boys are disproportionately provided spatial and construction toys that foster mechanical reasoning and 3D-rotation skills, while girls are guided toward care-oriented play. This dynamic is reinforced by parental and educator mindsets that systematically attribute higher technical competence to boys (Oppermann, Brunner and Anders, 2019; MINTality, 2025).

For instance, in Austria during secondary schooling, despite matching boys in mathematics and science performance, girls experience a sharp decline in STEM self-efficacy. This confidence deficit drives severe horizontal segregation in Vocational Education and Training, where women account for the minority of technical apprentices, students of Higher Technical Colleges and university STEM graduates (L&R Social Research, 2023; MINTality, 2026). Currently, Austria falls just below the 40% EU 2030 target for the percentage of students in tertiary STEM education being women (European Commission, n.d.). Where female students pursue STEM education, they frequently face a heavily male-dominated environment, isolation, and high dropout rates. This divide is rooted in family and cultural dynamics, which include bias and belief of lack of natural STEM predisposition among women, which leads to lower budgeting into STEM education for girls, mismatch in values, where job security and work-life balance are prioritised while careers in STEM are thought to be solitary, as well as lack of visible female STEM role models in everyday schooling, reinforcing the perception that engineering belongs outside the female domain (MINTality, 2025).

## Consequences

Early segregation into STEM and non-STEM results in decreased confidence in one's own abilities, lower self-esteem, negative belief about career prospects or the lack of belief that pursuing a STEM career is a possibility due to traditionally male-dominated fields. Additionally, segregation upon labor market entry further exacerbates the gap, where the majority of women work in female-dominated sectors (healthcare, education, administration), while the majority of men dominate technical and engineering fields (Kreimer, 2004; L&R Social Research, 2016). Within the European Union, women represent only 19.5% of ICT specialists and face systematic barriers in accessing employer-sponsored advanced digital and AI training (Eurostat, 2026). Therefore, the initial skill gap that is prominent from early childhood translates directly into career prospects for the youth, and further into gender wealth gap.



## Current Solutions and Proposed Actions

Taking into account the above-mentioned interconnection between early gender segregation, societal belief about STEM predisposition, as well as decreased self-confidence and belief in abilities as a result of societal pressure and categorisation, the following are the proposed actions that should be taken to prevent the gender skill and confidence gaps from becoming wider within the STEM fields.

### Call to Action

**Early Education & Families**

Integrate spatial, mechanical, and problem-solving play into early preschool learning.

**Vocational & Secondary Schools**

Introduce visible female mentorship programs in technical tracks to prevent pipeline drop-outs.

**Engaging Gatekeepers Directly**

Programs must actively inform parents and teachers, countering myths by illustrating that STEM roles offer collaborative environments, social value, and flexible work conditions.

**Employers & Policymakers**

Provide equal access to employer-funded digital and AI reskilling, enforce transparent promotion paths, and expand state-funded childcare to remove the care-work penalty.

**Longitudinal Immersion Over One-Off Days**

Single-day workshops rarely shift educational paths. Year-long collaborative projects encouraging girls' participation in STEM build lasting self-efficacy and belief that pursuing a STEM career path is a possibility.

## Violence Against Women

One in three women globally and one in three in the EU have experienced a form of violence in their lifetime (World Health Organisation, 2021; Eurostat, 2024). Look around you. You may be sitting next to one of them.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a wide spectrum of violent acts affecting women and girls, which vary from bullying, cat-calling and stalking, to physical, mental and sexual abuse. Strikingly, VAWG has been deemed a 'national threat' and an 'epidemic' for two years in a row in the United Kingdom (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025), while the World Health Organisation (2026) calls it a 'global public health crisis' showing the wide scope of the matter and the extent of its impact. Violence is often a silent threat, which occurs both in public spaces such as workplaces and city streets, as well as in private relationships and scenarios where women expect to feel the most safe. (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025). Despite the large prevalence of VAWG, in the EU less than 14% of cases are reported to authorities by the survivors (FRA, EIGE and Eurostat, 2024).

In addition to the abovementioned forms of violence, a new form of abuse has significantly amplified its impact in recent years − namely, online and technology-assisted means of inflicting harm, with cyberviolence and misogynistic content on the rise through online chatbots and algorithms disproportionately targeting girls and women (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025). The digital space facilitates an increase in sexist and misogynistic behaviour, leading to young women feeling significantly less safe nowadays than even 10 years ago (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025).

## Causes

### Stereotypes and Toxic Gender Expectations

Violence against women is connected to stereotypical gender role division and unequal power dynamics. Control, jealousy, possessiveness or separation are some of the most common reasons for abuse in close relationships, which lead to re-occurrance of violence and gender-related deprivation of life (femicide). Therefore, it is essential to recognise individual and systemic patterns of violence, as well as warning signs of controlling behaviours at an early stage (UNODC, 2022).

Reports in the UK illustrate that over 300 domestic abuse cases in 2026 were linked to the football World Cup, with speculations of more (NPCC, 2026). However, the sport itself may not be the cause, but rather a way of exposing societal problems with emotional regulation, alcohol misuse and toxic masculinity. These stem from traditional expectations of a patriarchal system, in which young men are often taught about forced control and wrongly encouraged to distance emotionally as to not be perceived as 'weak'. These gender norms can develop from a young age, making it essential to engage in early prevention through education on equality, consent, emotions, and healthy relationships, as well as involving young men in conversations about women's safety.

# Causes

## Inequality Affects Intersectionality and Adolescence

Unfortunately, girls and young women encounter harmful stereotypes, sexism and abuse in the majority of spaces, starting in education. In the United Kingdom, individuals of school and university age (16-24) are the group most affected by sexual violence, the vast majority of which are female (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025). EU-wide research showed that over 65% of female university students have experienced gender based violence at their institution (Lipinsky et al., 2022). Reports also suggest an insufficient awareness about psychological and sexual abuse in adolescent relationships (Home Office, 2015).

There are particular personal characteristics that further increase the prevalence of violence: having a migrant status, being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, being part of ethnic minority, having special education needs and having a disability (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025), pointing to the intersectionality of the problem. For instance, in addition to daily challenges, migrant women and girls have to face barriers to language and knowledge about their rights, as well as insecurities when arriving in a new country, while women with disabilities often have to rely and depend more on their relatives and partners for support (World Health Organization, 2024).

## Online Abuse and Digital Misuse

For today's generation, VAWG is also prevalent in the digital space. Young women spend much of their social and professional lives online, where they can face harassment, stalking, threats, image-based abuse and online control.

Technology-facilitated violence and new risks introduced by Artificial Intelligence, such as fake sexual images and online abuse, affect the safety, education and confidence of young women (Cerise et al., 2025). Knowing that girls aged 10-15 are the victims of digital and tech-facilitated VAWG most often in the UK (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025), it is imperative that online safety is an inherent part of VAWG prevention.




# Consequences

VAWG results in a range of consequences for girls and women, which include depression (UN Women, 2024), isolation, fear, decreased school attendance (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025), anxiety, devaluation of self, lower self-esteem, and overreliance on external sources of validation due to coercive control and psychological abuse in relationships.

Due to lack of clear definitions and legal frameworks for young people aged under 16, they are also often 'lost in the system', with their experiences of violence remaining in the liminal space between domestic and child abuse cases (Riaz and Mutebi, 2025).

## Current Solutions and Proposed Actions

Currently measures are taken to support victims of abuse, ensure safe spaces and provide support services. Schools in Austria implement gender equality, violence prevention and tolerance lesson topics, EU-wide initiative GenderSAFE aims to end gender based violence at research institutions, UK-based HASSL addresses root causes of violence and involves men in conversations, while an Austrian NGO ZARA promotes civil courage and fights against all forms of racism.

ZARA provides one example of a preventive educational approach: its workshops teach children and adolescents to recognise discrimination, question stereotypes and develop strategies for respect online and offline. However, in April 2026 the organisation faced a temporary funding cut, putting the essential prevention work at risk (ZARA, 2026) and highlighting the importance of funding support for such organisations. Based on the insight into the problem of VAWG provided, we propose the following actions:

### Call to Action

#### Prevention through education

More schools have to implement comprehensive education about safety, risks of violence, gender equality, as well as emotional expression, regulation, and self-confidence into the curriculum – not as an optional after school class, but as an integral part of education from the earliest school years.

#### Actively inviting young men and boys into conversations

Supporting young men in noticing harmful patriarchal patterns, toxic expectations and rejecting gender-based violence will facilitate addressing the problem of VAWG and decrease the likelihood of becoming a perpetrator later in life (UNICEF, 2025). Challenging misogyny, harmful patriarchal systems, and inequality can be a great start and important tool for prevention of unhealthy, uncontrolled emotions and therefore violence against women.

#### Cooperation between parents, the government and educational institutions

Collaboration is needed to ensure that the youth receives quality education about roots and consequences of abuse, safe spaces to talk and seek support, as well as healthier role models to look up to and seek guidance from.

## From Observers to Co-Shapers

### Gender Equality is Equality for All

Gender Equality and empowering women are the foundations for a united and just world for everyone. Therefore, the issues raised in this chapter, namely gaps in women's health, STEM education and technical careers, as well as the ongoing violation of women's safety through violence against women and girls are crucial to be addressed early and collectively by policy-shapers and decision-makers.

Particularly, it is of utmost importance that the youth, with emphasis on young women, are involved in such processes, to ensure that the divisions are not multiplied and no new gender gaps emerge.

### Parma Square for Gender Equality

The following proposed action should be considered in addition to those proposed alongside each of the issues described in the chapter. Parma being the European Youth Capital 2027 carries a great responsibility to engage the European youth in conversations about gender equality and women empowerment.

Therefore, we propose the creation of a 'square' dedicated to gender equality, where the youth would work collaboratively with decision-makers to shape policies and dialogue, becoming policy-shapers themselves, with agency to address gender gaps that directly affect women's wellbeing, confidence, career prospects and safety.



# COUNTRY CASE STUDY – POLAND

## Girls Future Ready Foundation
## Where Young Women Thrive

### By Young Women for Young Women



Girls Future Ready Foundation (GFR) is the largest nonprofit organisation for young women led by young women in Europe. Since 2018, GFR has impacted over 100,000 girls. GFR operates across Central-Eastern Europe (CEE), where self-confidence of women is on the lower end of the spectrum and structural barriers to women's participation in public and economic life remain acute. The Foundation equips girls aged 14-26 with the skills, platforms, and agency to become prepared for a rapidly changing world. GFR was founded by Zofia Kierner, acclaimed advocate for women empowerment, at the age of 15, rooted in personal experience of noticing the gap in self-belief and confidence among young women in Poland.

Through educational and developmental programs, as well as year-round support, GFR supports women to believe in their own potential, as well as advances their full and equal participation in political, social, and economic life. GFR does so through the following global programs. #HerStory Program is one of the most practical programs for young women in CEE, as it if focused on building real skills, and moves beyond traditional mentorship to practical, expert collaboration. It empowers young women to take ownership and lead independent projects across a range of fields. By encouraging self-agency and skill-building, GFR supports #HerStory laureates in making sure women are not just an integral part of public life, but that they are the ones actively shaping it. Additionally, GFR recognises young women as policy-shapers and changemakers. The Youth Advisory Boards are designed to foster knowledge exchange between young women and executives from well-established global companies. Moreover, GFR takes women's participation and empowerment one step further by platforming female voices on a global stage at the Girls Future Ready Summit − the biggest conference in the world by young women for young women. Women empowerment and gender equality is at the root of what drives GFR forward, because, as the motto of the Foundation states: "We know girls are powerful. Our mission is to help them know it too".

## The Gender Gap in Central-Eastern Europe

The Girls Future Ready Foundation addresses the confidence and skill gap in Central-Eastern Europe, while advancing young women's participation in various aspects of public life. According to the 2021 report on women empowerment in CEE by McKinsey & Company, over half of the CEE population and over 60% of university graduates are women. Nevertheless, such a high qualification rate does not translate into the workplace (Harring et al., 2022), as women in CEE make up less than 50% of population in employment and are represented even less in managerial roles. Even though young people (15-24) face the smallest gender employment gap across European countries, with women still less likely to be employed compared to men, the gap rises sharply from age 25 and above (Eurostat, 2026). Therefore, it is important to address the inequalities earlier to prevent their deepening as the personal and professional career of an individual progresses.

Moreover, adolescent girls report feelings of low self-esteem and poor mental health, particularly around the age of 15, with social pressures further impacting on wellbeing (World Health Organisation, 2023). Although in 2022 the Central-Eastern European youth viewed their personal future prospects with optimism, in Poland, where the Girls Future Ready Foundation is based, the positive attitude was lower compared to countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary or Slovakia.

The decrease in optimism was particularly apparent for young women in Poland, representing the lowest rate of confidence in their own future and opportunities compared to young women in other countries studied (Harring et al., 2022). Closing the gender gap in CEE would not only have economic benefits for the region (McKinsey & Company, 2021), but also improve young women's participation in European society as a whole − and the Girls Future Ready Foundation is at the forefront of making it happen.

## The Power of Young Women's Voice and Action

The Girls Future Ready Foundation is a prominent example of how young women are leading the change that they want to see in the world. The beneficiaries of the Foundation, ambitious young women, develop personally and professionally, connect with inspiring role models and mentors, expand their comfort zone and turn dreams into reality. Importantly, they are part of a community filled with support and mutual empowerment that is so crucial to building self-confidence and belief in own abilities. Therefore, officials in governance should take from GFR's example, acknowledge the importance of youth voice and actively involve young women in decision-making, as well as shaping the present and the future, so that no decisions are made about women without women.

# Education System Reform

Education shapes the future,
so who gets access to it matters.

# THE INTERRAIL STORY

As soon as I got off the train at Brussels Central Station I accidentally ran into Lucas: a young policymaker from Belgium, in the middle of preparing his speech for the European Commission. He was clearly busy, but he put his work aside for a while to talk to me and explain his mission.

Most of what he told me I was already aware of. Still, hearing it from someone who had been through so many institutions, and fought so hard to get where he now stands, was incredibly interesting − especially because he seemed so enthusiastic speaking about his future career and his plans at the Commission!

Lucas said he grew up in a lower socio-economic household − therefore it was quite difficult for him to get into a secondary school which actually supports its students' political interests and offers them the chance to speak to local policymakers. After getting a scholarship for that school, he studied hard to get into national political programs, which took him to speak at the Commission.

After all these years of hard work, he looked back at the barriers he had to overcome to get where he stands now and decided that his speech at the commission will be about equal access to educational programs for every socioeconomic class – because what he had to work hard and get scholarships for, others could simply afford to buy!



# EDUCATION SYSTEM REFORM: THE ASSESSMENT GAP BETWEEN LEARNING AND CERTIFICATION

In European school systems, assessment is treated as the neutral instrument placed at the end of teaching. In practice it operates as the **actual curriculum**. Whatever gets examined is what gets taught, and everything else becomes an optional extra. Of the eight key competences recommended at Union level, only literacy and numeracy are reliably certified. The remainder stay rhetorical.

How a young person performs therefore depends less on what they have actually learned than on three largely arbitrary factors: the **format** they are assessed in, the moment the assessment happens and how much rides on that single **moment**, and the **resources** their family can mobilise around it. These factors do not act separately, they compound. A student who does not perform well under timed, written, one-shot conditions, who is sorted into a track at 10 or 11, and whose family cannot pay for private tutoring ends up on a fundamentally different educational path than a student with identical ability and identical learning. This is why curriculum reform stalls again and again as long as certification stays untouched: the examination system always wins against the syllabus.

## Main Causes

The causes are design choices rather than accidents. Most European examination systems were built to distribute a limited number of school and university places, and they still perform that allocative task well; showing what a young person has actually learned was never the function they were engineered for.

### 1 Age selection

Several Member States still take binding tracking decisions between ages 10 and 12, long before background disadvantage could realistically be compensated for, and in systems that select earlier, the association between socio-economic background and performance is systematically stronger.

### 2 Weight concentrated on one terminal

This converts speed, memory, and exam technique on a single day into a lifelong entitlement.

### 3 Shadow education market

This converts family income directly into grades: household spending on private tutoring reaches the equivalent of roughly 17% and 20% of total government education expenditure in Cyprus and Greece, uptake is concentrated in higher professional households, and there is no EU-level monitoring of this market.

## Compounding Disadvantage and Exam Pressure

Assessment is not one gate but a sequence: being taught what is examined, being able to prepare for it, performing on that day, and having the result recognised. A young person can drop out at any of these steps, depending on format, timing or family resources:

- **For students:** Socio-economic status accounts for some 15% of the variation in mathematics performance across OECD countries, advantaged students outscore disadvantaged ones by 93 points, and disadvantaged students are seven times more likely not to reach basic proficiency. The result is compounded by pressure: 63% of 15-year-old girls report feeling pressured by schoolwork, up from 54% in 2018, against 43% of boys5. Almost nothing else that puts young people under pressure is scheduled this precisely, applies to everyone, and was designed entirely by adults. For disabled, neurodivergent and second-language students the format additionally measures the disability or the language of instruction, because accommodations are granted as individual exceptions instead of built into the instrument.

- **For teachers:** The certification they must prepare students for narrows the curriculum they are formally asked to teach, reducing professional autonomy to exam preparation. The alternatives are not cost-free: continuous and portfolio-based assessment is far more time-intensive than marking one exam, and teacher-based grading carries documented bias by gender, migration background and name.

- **For the European community:** Systems end up chasing whatever is easiest to count. Progress towards the European Education Area targets is itself monitored mainly through test-based underachievement rates, so the instrument under criticism also defines success. Where the certificate rewards recall, speed and purchased preparation, the school abdicates its function as an engine of mobility and cohesion.

### Existing Instruments and the Certification Blind Spot

**Alternative certification exists but carries no weight.** Micro-credentials and the Europass infrastructure provide portable recognition, and the Digital Education Action Plan and the Pathways to School Success Recommendation address digital literacy and early leaving (European Commission, 2021; Council of the European Union, 2022); none of them specifies how the competences involved should be certified, and participation stays voluntary. They remain decoration alongside the one real exam.

**National reforms show that change is possible and fragile.** Poland's 1999 reform postponed tracking by roughly one year, and the first cohort to pass through the reformed comprehensive stage scored around 11 reading points higher in PISA 2003 than the pre-reform cohort of 2000; performance continued to rise to 508 by 2006, with differences between schools narrowing. The 2017 reform abolished the comprehensive lower-secondary stage and restored the earlier structure. Two things follow: the age of selection measurably moves outcomes, and reform gains are reversible without institutional anchoring.

Ireland shows the same is possible at the high-stakes end. School-based classroom assessments were introduced at junior cycle, and since 2025 the Leaving Certificate is being redeveloped subject by subject so that a non-written component carries at least 40% of the marks, with full rollout by 2029. Yet the CAO points race continues to sustain one of Europe's most visible private tutoring markets. Format reform alone does not remove the financial barrier.

## Strategic Solutions

Education remains a national competence: the Union can recommend, fund and monitor, but cannot mandate assessment standards. Any proposal must therefore work through comparability and recognition rather than obligation, and must address format, timing, and resources together, since tackling one of the three only relocates the pressure. Two limits are conceded openly: standardised exams exist partly to make certificates portable and comparable across borders, so weakening them without a common framework would work against student mobility; and as long as the competition for scarce study places is untouched, no reform of the instrument removes the pressure – it only moves it.

**Cap the single moment and broaden what counts (format):** a common European reference framework for competence-based assessment by 2028, covering more than literacy and numeracy and setting minimum accessibility standards, with Member States reducing the share of the upper-secondary certificate decided by one terminal exam to a maximum of 60% by 2029.

Since continuous and teacher-based assessment is not automatically fairer, the framework also requires a **mandatory fairness audit** of national exams before each reform cycle and formative, AI-aware assessment design in teacher training from 2027.

**Postpone the binding decision and anchor it (timing):** move the first binding selection to **no earlier than age 15**, starting with volunteering Member States, by 2030.

Given the Polish precedent the measure only holds if anchored against reversal; students with voting rights on national curriculum and examination boards from 2027 are one such anchor, and would end the situation in which the instrument deciding young people's paths is designed exclusively by adults.

**Make the money visible and the new certificates count (resources):** publish comparable, disaggregated data on selection age, exam weight, tutoring spending and exam stress, turning a market that is currently unmonitored at Union level into a policy object addressed directly rather than as an afterthought; and secure recognition of reformed certificates by universities and employers before, not after, reform.

If selection institutions keep running their own entrance tests, reform merely moves the gate instead of opening it.

## The Role of the Teacher

### The Educational Rift Between Student and Teacher

In European school contexts, a profound professional frustration is widespread among teachers, often forced into the role of mere transmitters of knowledge and certifiers of evaluation standards through traditional frontal lessons.

This rigid and unidirectional model **fails to meet the educational needs of new generations** and generates a sense of professional powerlessness: teachers feel an urgent need to rediscover their educational vocation by assuming a global caring role for students in their entirety.

This feeling is aggravated by professional isolation and the **absence of shared educational perspectives** within teaching staff. The lack of a collegial vision fuels misunderstandings, builds a **barrier in teachers' relationships** with students, and empties teaching of its meaning and effectiveness.

### Main Causes

The causes lie in recruitment and training processes that have historically been oriented towards disciplinary rigour to the detriment of relational and pedagogical and interpersonal skills.

According to surveys by the Eurydice network (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018) and OECD TALIS data, initial training remains focused on transmitting subject knowledge: over **40% of European teachers declare themselves inadequately prepared at the start of their careers** in managing the socio-emotional dynamics of the entire class group and in differentiating teaching between learning styles, heterogeneous needs, and Special Educational Needs.

Added to this limitation is a marked temporal asynchrony: in the face of the rapid transformation of society, increasingly multicultural and characterised by new generational languages, **school institutions and curricula evolve extremely slowly**, leaving teachers without adequate operational tools.

## Discomfort and Early School Dropout

The educational and relational divide produces documented critical impacts:

- **For students:** An impersonal climate fuels performance anxiety and disaffection, pushing back against the updated European Union strategic targets for school dropouts and early leavers from education and training (ELET/ESL < 9% by 2030). Compared to an EU-wide average of 9.1%–9.4%, strong national and territorial disparities emerge: alongside countries performing below the target threshold such as Belgium (7.0%–7.3%), while others have seen recent upticks, such as Austria (8.1%–10.0%), critical vulnerabilities persist, such as in Italy, where the national rate has dropped to 9.8% but still peaks at 11.3%–15.0% in the South and Islands and reaches 21.3% among foreign-born youths.

- **For teachers:** As highlighted by OECD TALIS and the EU-OSHA agency (Work-related stress and psychosocial risks in education), professional isolation and institutional rigidity continue tostrain the profession. Societal recognition remains subdued across many European systems, contributing to a drop in teachers who would choose the career again (down to 76.5%). Managing the learning environment is a significant strain: 45% of teachers report classroom discipline as a primary source of stress, a share rising to 55% among novice teachers, while over 30% struggle with excessive preparation and bureaucratic burdens. Overall high stress levels affect between 19% (global TALIS baseline) and over 40% of educators in higher-pressure systems, with early- career teachers facing the highest vulnerability due to precarious fixed-term contracts, allocation to demanding school contexts, and substantial risks of early attrition.

- **For the European community:** Schools risk abdicating their mission of civic emancipation and social cohesion, embodying the Don Milaniparadox of the "hospital that treats the healthy and rejects the sick," as structural disparities and segregated learning environments continue to disproportionately penalize the most vulnerable students.

## Theoretical Models and Fragmentary Policies

On a theoretical level, pedagogy offers solid frameworks, in school policy, however, the measures remain inadequate:

Induction and continuous training: The peer learning and mentoring initiatives promoted by European guidelines and by INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research) often amount to bureaucratic procedures with no real impact on classroom teaching.

Fixed-term projects (PON and PNRR): The mentoring and dropout prevention interventions funded through the PON (National Operational Programme) and the **extraordinary funding under the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan)** within the NextGenerationEU framework are affected by the emergency logic. Because they are delivered through competitive calls and tied to reporting requirements, they cannot be stabilised within permanent staffing establishments or integrated into everyday curricular practice.

## Strategic Solutions

Overcoming the emergency requires structural reforms, though it must be stressed that the introduction of specialised roles is only effective if **supported by a genuine, shared will within the school community** to rethink its educational identity.

Structural integration of pedagogical and psychological support for students and teachers: establish **permanent pedagogical and psychological support figures within the school system**, oovercoming the precariousness of project-by-project calls.

These roles must be a permanent resource, directly accessible to students for confidential counselling, guidance and the prevention of distress, while also **supporting teachers in understanding classroom dynamics** and providing pedagogical supervision (Mortari & Bertolani, 2014). This strengthens the shared responsibility of the entire school community **without encouraging passive delegation**.

Active, experiential, and community-based lifelong learning: introduce lifelong learning not as a paid course or an additional burden for individuals, but as a regular, paid, and community-based component of service hours.

**Training must first-hand adopt the active methodss that teachers will transfer to the classroom:** cooperative workshops, role-play, and peer-learning. Only by experiencing these contexts can teachers acquire the ability to continually renew their practice in step with evolving knowledge, **promoting key European competences:** personal and socio-emotional (LifeComp), digital-educational (DigCompEdu), and sustainable citizenship (GreenComp).



Open environment and the complexity paradigm: embracing Edgar Morin's complexity theory to overcome the reductionist vision of the school as an institution (Morin, 2001).

Schools must act as authentically **complex ecosystems**, understood in the etymological sense of "woven together" (complexus), **interconnected with the real lives of students**, overcoming the bureaucratic rigidities that make them artificially complicated.

Teaching must be based on negotiation, active listening, and ongoing dialogue, in which **nurturing relationships is the foundation of all meaningful learning.**

# Participation of Students in the Educational System

Across Europe a question arises – how to prepare youth ready to participate in a democratic society? A 2017 Eurydice publication (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017) shows that **nearly all European Union Member States implement some type of legislation or recommendation concerning students' participation in school governance.**

Student participation is no longer treated as an optional extra, but as the basis for civic education and an indicator of educational quality. The real problem that remains is the distance between what is written in law and recommendations and what students experience.

This paper examines it through two linked issues: the **implementation gap** and the **agency deficit**.

### The Implementation Gap

The implementation gap refers to the distance between formal regulations and recommendations and the everyday practice of schools. The previously mentioned Eurydice paper studied the legislation but did not examine practice. There is a lack of studies on this topic, but based on the 2026 OBESSU study, the voice of student representative bodies, such as **student councils**, is in many cases ignored.

The picture is not uniform across Europe. Some states grant students statutory representation on actual decision-making bodies, such as school councils; others confine student representation to consultative bodies; and a few leave the matter to school autonomy. The consequence is a school that is less friendly to students, and the absence of an environment in which students can learn democratic participation.

### The Agency Deficit

The agency deficit describes a paradox visible in the data – European students know a great deal about democracy **but do not believe that participation matters**. The International Civic and Citizenship Education study from 2022 (Schulz et al., 2023) shows that in several states trust in public institutions fell compared to the previous study in 2016. The case of Denmark may be the most characteristic.

Danish students rank among the highest in civic knowledge internationally while reporting **the lowest expectations of future political engagement**. Civic engagement is also an uneven ground for students from different socio-economic backgrounds – s**tudents with lower socio-economic status are less active in civic life at school and less likely to plan future participation**, as shown in a study by Poland's Educational Research Institute (IBE).

## From Observers to Co-Shapers

Three recommendations follow from the analysis. The most important change is giving students **the power for real change in their academic environments**. National policymakers should grant student representation **genuine decision-making competences**, and the faculty should be **obliged to take them into consideration** and respond to them. Student advisory bodies should go from consultation to **co-decision**.

Second, a democratic culture needs to be introduced, and it should govern every school process. Democratic education should not be only a lesson in the classroom, **but a process interwoven into pupils' everyday life**.

The third and last recommendation is monitoring — not just of the law, but of practice. Evaluation should shift from formal frameworks to the day-to-day life of students, and this process should engage student organisations as **partners**.

If Europe wants its youth to participate in democratic processes, it needs to show them why it matters. The only way to do that is to give them power in their most character-forming years, in the place where they spend most of the time.



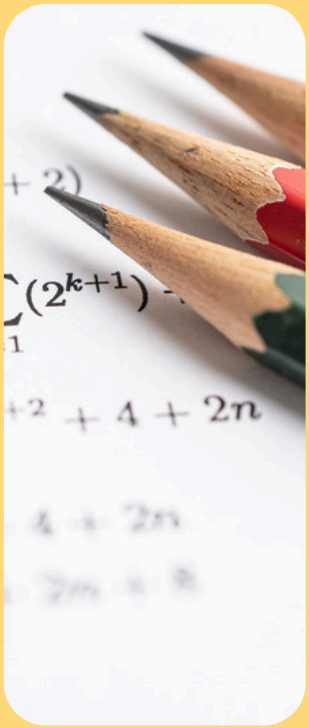
# COUNTRY CASE STUDY – ITALY

## No More Old-School Methods



Founded in Northern Italy in 2022 by 13 members (now 61) Discentis is a social startup aiming to tackle Italy's education system's decades-old issues: acting both on the importance and formation of teachers, and the correct development of students.

It is successfully creating a teachers' community (13,000 teachers), providing formation courses, and organizing interactive workshops for students (4000 just in 2025). Their extensive project evaluations help better understand issues and solutions' impact.



### Same Old Problems

The problems faced by Discentis concern both students and teachers:

- Teaching in Italy is being professionally delegitimised, its importance for future generations going unrecognised, while the system shows strong resistance to change because of disorganised resources and teacher training. This deters prospective teachers and leaves current ones unable to change.

- The Italian school system is traditionally based on deep theoretical study and frequent, difficult tests. This method proves less pedagogically effective than student- and skill centred methods, while putting strong psychological pressure on students, with consequences for mental health and school dropout.

### A Real Impact

Discentis addresses teacher isolation and outdated instruction by offering certified training, practical tools, and a collaborative peer network. In 2025 alone, over 1,000 teachers completed 918 training hours, reporting high satisfaction (3.63/4) and successfully applying active learning methods. Simultaneously, more than 4,000 students participated in interactive STEAM workshops. This significantly boosted student engagement, with 70% of high school participants reporting an improved relationship with STEAM subjects and the share of primary pupils describing science as "fun" increasing from 50% to 60.6%.

## What can be learned, and should be done

For similar initiatives, the core lesson is to leverage scalable online platforms and foster active educator communities for peer knowledge sharing. To maximize impact, governments should mandate continuous professional development and fund proven models like Discentis; an annual investment of €80 million would enable nationwide coverage in Italy, yielding long-term societal and economic returns. Looking ahead, Discentis is building a permanent, community-led infrastructure. By expanding its network from 13,000 to over 20,000 educators and forming strategic B2B and institutional partnerships, the startup plans to scale its model across Italy and Europe, fundamentally shifting teacher training from episodic compliance to a culture of continuous peer support and innovation.



# Democratic Participation & Political Literacy

Democracy works best
when young people have a voice.

# THE INTERRAIL STORY

When I got on the train to Budapest I saw that every seat was taken, so I went to the restaurant car hoping to find a seat there, and that was when I spotted Csilla! She seemed like the friendliest person in the carriage, so I sat down next to her. Csilla is an amazing young woman who is very interested in politics and society. She's super smart and honestly: she is going to change something!

Csilla and I talked for hours and hours about almost everything, and it felt freeing to talk to someone so motivated to stand up for her ideas! It was also very nice to spend such a long and usually boring train ride with someone as educated as she is.

But Csilla also told me a lot about the political system in Hungary and how it keeps young people out of important decision-making-processes! It's almost scandalous how the government ignores young people who are willing to engage in politics and are interested in what's going on in their country.

It starts with the lack of political education in school – Csilla told me that she didn't learn a thing about the government or the EU in school and had to teach herself everything she knows today. If a young person becomes interested in politics and wants to participate in decision-making-processes despite all the barriers, it's extremely hard for them to make their voice heard!



# DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION & POLITICAL LITERACY: THE CASE FOR STRENGTHENING EUROPEAN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

## Engaged But Powerless? An Overview of European Democratic Youth Participation

Across the European Union, young people exhibit a paradoxical relationship with democratic life. While Flash Eurobarometer surveys show that young Europeans are actively engaged in informal civic spaces, with 64% participating in organisational activities and 49% taking action for societal change through petitions, rallies, or digital advocacy (European Commission, 2024), this high level of civic energy fails to translate into institutional political participation. Institutional youth turnout in European Parliament elections dropped to 36% among under-25s in 2024 (EU Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2024; European Parliament, 2023), and Members of Parliament under the age of 30 continue to represent less than 2% of legislative assemblies (European Parliament, 2023).

This gap stems from a lack of capacity-building, structural access, and practical civic skills during formative secondary education (ages 14–18). When young people feel ill-equipped to navigate complex national and EU decision-making structures, a sense of political alienation emerges. Unaddressed, this inability to influence formal policy breeds frustration with democratic institutions, leading youth to perceive representative government as unresponsive. In turn, this creates vulnerabilities to populist illusions or autocratic alternatives that promise swift and simplified solutions (European Parliament, 2023).

## Key Conceptual Definitions

To establish a common framework for action, European policy makers and educational institutions must distinguish key terms in this debate:

### Youth Participation

The active involvement of young people in civic, political, and decision-making processes. This includes conventional/institutional participation (e.g. voting, standing for office, political party membership) and non-conventional/informal engagement (e.g., petitions, peaceful demonstrations, online activism, community volunteering) (European Parliament, 2023).

### Political Efficacy

An individual's internal belief that they possess the skills and understanding to participate in political affairs (internal efficacy), alongside the conviction that political systems will respond to their demands (external efficacy) (European Parliament, 2023).

### Civic Literacy & Competence

The knowledge, critical thinking skills, and democratic values needed to process political information, identify disinformation, and actively exercise democratic rights (European Commission, 2024).

## Focus Areas for Policy Recommendations

To shift youth participation from superficial consultation to structural empowerment, this brief evaluates three core policy solutions:

### 1 Reducing Barriers to Representation

Direct measures to increase the proportion of elected young policymakers within local, national, and EU institutions (e.g. party list youth quotas and age eligibility alignment) (European Parliament, 2023).

### 2 Harmonizing the Voting Age at 16:

Extending franchise rights across EU Member States to foster lifelong voting habits early, building on success models in Austria, Malta, Germany, and Belgium (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2024).

### 3 Scaling Interactive Civic Education Models:

Expanding competence-based curricula, mock elections, and school participatory budgeting in secondary education (ages 14-18) to cultivate practical political agency (European Parliament, 2023).

## Breaking Barriers: The Fight for Youth Representation in Europe

In the past, youth have faced a number of systemic barriers and presuppositions regarding their political participation - and still do.

Apart from Austria and Malta (all elections; 16), Germany and Belgium (only European Parliament elections; 16) and Greece (all elections; 17), most European Member States have set the minimum voting age for national elections at 18 years (with exceptions), which is a legal barrier for all politically educated young people under 18 wanting to see their opinions and concerns represented (European Parliament, 2023).

From 2007 on, when Austria became the first EU Member State to lower the voting age from 18 to 16, voter turnout in the age group of 16- to 17-year-olds was between 2,3% and 10,0% higher compared to older first-time voters (18-20 years) over the course of five elections (local, regional, national) (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020; European Commission, 2025).
The support these young people received from educational institutions providing space for discussion and opinion formation as well as being surrounded by adults who have already established a habit of voting contributed to the mentioned numbers.

Only a small proportion of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are under 30, with the average age of MEPs at the time of election (2024) being 50 years (Mácsai, 2024). Having visible role models that actively represent youth's opinions and long-term concerns is essential for creating a sustainable system in which young people feel seen and to which they want to contribute in the future as well as in the present.

The absence of firmly established democratic education across all European countries is an ever-growing concern, with social media and the incidental exposure to extremist content influencing young-people's opinions without them having the space and others to communicate and reflect with.

## A Disenchanted Gen Z: Looming Democratic Instability and Distrust

The systematic exclusion of secondary-school-aged youth from institutional decision-making imposes severe costs on the health, stability, and legitimacy of European democracy (European Parliament, 2023).

### Democratic Instability and Erosion of Institutional Trust

When young people are systematically left without formal avenues to influence policy, their long-term political socialisation is damaged. Lower early participation correlates directly with lower political interest, reduced voting habits in adulthood, and diminishing trust in democratic governance (European Parliament, 2023). Because political decisions, ranging from climate adaptation to public debt and educational reforms, carry long-term intergenerational consequences, denying youth a seat at the table creates an acute representation deficit. Politicians face little incentive to address youth-centric issues when young people are underrepresented in the electorate and in parliaments, triggering a vicious cycle of disengagement and policy misalignment (European Parliament, 2023).

### Social Disparities, Polarization, and Stakeholder Impacts

The lack of structural empowerment disproportionately affects socio-economically disadvantaged youth, rural students, and those from migrant backgrounds (European Parliament, 2023). High-quality civic opportunities - such as youth exchange programs, deliberative forums, and leadership initiatives - remain concentrated among privileged, highly educated demographics (Data.europa.eu, 2023; European Parliament, 2023).

This unequal access deepens civic inequality, leaving marginalized 14-to-18-year-olds excluded from democratic tools and aggravating societal polarisation.

## Direct Capacity Building: Empowerment through Education

As written above, Europe's youth experiences several barriers when it comes to actual political participation in democracy, although a majority of young people are motivated to take part in politics.
One primary barrier described above is the lack of political and democratic education in secondary educational institutions. In fact, there is no precise number of programs and organisations in the EU focusing on democratic education. The European Democratic Education Community (EUDEC), the umbrella organisation for democratic education in Europe, counts 97 member schools, each reaching around 100 students (EUDEC, 2026).

School curricula reflect the same gap: according to a Val-You survey from 2024, "political education" is only mentioned as a distinct subject in the compulsory school curriculum of 2 of the 6 countries studied, which turn out to be Austria and Greece.



On the other side, schools themselves try to motivate adolescents to engage in politics by initiating student councils and “providing students with opportunities to collaborate with local governments and influence real-world decisions” (Sieben and Muis, 2025).

The connection between longer education, especially focusing on teaching the knowledge for understanding politics, and political interest and engagement is also highlighted in “Education and political engagement” (Le and Nguyen, 2021). Understanding the language and structure of the government makes it significantly easier for young people to enter programs, find opportunities and make their voices heard (Le and Nguyen, 2021).

The European Parliament Ambassador Schools Programme (EPAS) is one successful example of providing democratic education for students. In a network of over 2000 certified schools, almost 5500 teachers (senior ambassadors) and nearly 39500 students (junior ambassadors) try to provide and gain better knowledge about the European Union and how it works.

Ambassadors organise activities around Europe Day (May 9th), create info points and hold workshops in their schools for other students, and also take part in events hosted by different institutions of the European Union.

Being involved in the shared process of learning about Europe and networking with other young people inspires students to take action and expand on what they know, showing them that the European Union isn’t only something one hears about on the news, but something we live everyday - and something that is worth holding on to. (Ida Tscherry, Gymnasium und ORG Dachsberg)

## Duty and Privilege of a Democracy - Our Voting Right

The proposal of lowering the voting age to 16 is increasingly recognized as a potential tool for strengthening democratic resilience, as it allows youth to be "agents of social change" rather than just "citizens in the making" (Joni et al., 2024).

Austria led the charge, as the first EU country to lower the general voting age to 16 in 2007, as part of a broader package of electoral law changes (Parlament Österreich, 2026). Research conducted by the University of Vienna through the Austrian National Election Study shows that 16- and 17-year-olds often vote at higher rates than older first-time voters, aged 18-21 in other EU countries, and that they are well-prepared to take part in elections, as political knowledge, combined with interest, is a primary driver of turnout for this demographic (Aichholzer and Kritzinger, 2020). The 2008 national election saw an 88% turnout for 16-year-old first-time voters, however this "boost" did fluctuate, dropping to 63% in 2013 before rising again in 2017 (Aichholzer and Kritzinger, 2020). Malta followed suit in 2018 and lowered the age to 16, which led to a high youth turnout of 72.7% in following elections and a measurable increase in youth interest regarding climate change and human rights (Lelwic-Ojeda and Akintola, 2021).

Further results of this legal change appear to be that the first election for which a person is eligible leaves a lasting "footprint" on their future behavior (Bacalso et al., 2023). Enfranchising citizens while they are still in stable environments, such as school or the parental home, allows for better support of their initial political socialization. Investigations by Eichhorn and Huebner (2025) into the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum have proven that individuals in Scotland who were first allowed to vote at age 16 have maintained higher turnout rates in subsequent elections compared to those who were first eligible to vote at 18 or 19 (Anlar et al., 2025).

## From Appeasement to Changemaking: Systematic Representation of Youth

Besides enabling youth politically through the active voting right, the passive voting right is equally important in terms of dismantling systemic and institutional barriers to just youth representation. Despite making up half of the world's population, young people aged 30 and under hold only 2.8% of seats in national parliaments globally (Joshi, 2026). In 28 countries, there is no youth representation in the lower house at all.

Globally, there are several methods to address the systemic underrepresentation of young people in decision-making bodies. One prominent structural approach involves the use of reserved seats, which are parliamentary positions specifically set aside by law to ensure a guaranteed minimum presence of young representatives regardless of election outcomes (Joshi, 2026). This model has been implemented in countries such as Uganda, Morocco, Kenya, and Zimbabwe to provide a direct institutional mandate for youth voices. Alternatively, legislated candidate quotas legally mandate that political parties include a specified minimum percentage of young people on their electoral lists for general elections.

While these quotas do not guarantee election, they significantly improve the presence of youth on the ballot, as seen in Algeria (50% of candidates must be under 40), Ecuador (25% of candidates need to be aged 18–29), Gabon (20% of candidates must be aged 35 and under) and Jordan (at least one young person needs to be placed within the first five candidates on a party list) (Joshi, 2026).

The least stringent approach involves voluntary political party quotas, which are internal statutes adopted by individual parties to encourage the recruitment of young aspirants. Political parties in countries like Sweden, Lithuania, and Croatia have successfully utilized such voluntary targets to improve the diversity of their candidate slates (Joshi, 2026). While numerical representation alone does not automatically result in substantive reforms regarding issues important to youth, it serves as a critical first step in signaling that institutional inclusion is a viable possibility (Joshi, 2026).

However, meaningful youth participation can also be enabled by institutionalised co-determination, where decision-making authorities are forced to include a youth perspective (UNESCO, 2026). This involves both the expansion of the active voting right and the creation of structures that grant youth a direct mandate over resources and policy outcomes.

An example of co-determination over resources is participatory budgeting, such as the *RuutiBudjetti* model in Helsinki, where youth representatives negotiate directly with city officials to decide which projects will be funded from the public budget (Borkowska-Waszak et al., 2021). Similarly, the reformed *Sangguniang Kabataan* in the Philippines provides local youth councils with true financial independence by granting them direct authority over 10% of the local barangay (village-level) budget to implement their own programs (Lelwic-Ojeda and Akintola, 2021).

In Denmark, the independent, youth-led Climate Council has a formal connection to the Minister for Climate and Energy, who is legally obliged to reply to their proposals and meet with them at least twice a year to justify policy decisions (Borkowska-Waszak et al., 2021). In countries like Finland and Norway, national legislation explicitly mandates the establishment of youth councils in all municipalities and requires authorities to consult them on all relevant policy matters, ensuring their voices address issues directly in the halls of power (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.; Kommuneloven, 2018).

## From Observers to Co-Shapers

European youth are engaged and willing to contribute. The high levels of participation in petitions, demonstrations, organisations and digital advocacy prove this. However, this civic energy remains only partially connected to formal institutions. Young people lack consistent civic preparation, meaningful access to decision-making and realistic pathways into elected office. Therefore a combined policy package of the following is recommended.

## Call to Action

### Practical Civic Education

Interactive, experience-based learning models address low political efficacy and equip youth with practical socio-political skills. Initiatives by the EU partnered with local schools could deliver such programs.

### Voting Rights from Age 16

Lowering the general voting age to 16 has the potential to counter the intergenerational democratic deficit. National Parliaments are responsible for the necessary constitutional and electoral law amendments.

### Enforceable Mechanisms for Youth Representation

Institutionalizing mandated youth quotas works against the representation gap. Parliaments must legislate these structural requirements, and political parties are to be called upon to diversify their internal membership and nominate young candidates to winnable seats.

# COUNTRY CASE STUDY – EU

## When Education Connects A School With Europe




The earlier mentioned EPAS-Programme also serves as a great example of democratic education which leads to thousands of students being interested and involved in Europe's policy. As already discussed, education, especially political and democratic education, is the key to engaged citizens, who understand the meaning and worth of democracy, know how to engage in political decisions and are able to confidently speak up for their rights.

Understanding policy motivates people to actively participate in democracy, which is the main point of democracy (Bundeskanzleramt, 2026). Simply giving people the right to vote and the right to participate in political decisions does not define a functional democracy. Only by educating its citizens and giving them knowledge to understand policy can a democracy be stable and is able to be resilient through crises (Parlament Österreich, 2025).

The EPAS-Program is doing exactly that, giving access to political education to students all across Europe no matter their social or educational backgrounds (European Parliament, n.d.). In the chapter “Direct Capacity Building: Empowerment through Education” one of the over 2000 schools in Europe is mentioned. The account of the personal experience of one of the over 39500 students shows how people involved in the programme think about the EU and democracy. It is a positive and trustful view of the EU - reached by education and involvement into decision making processes.



## Students who have taken part in the programme report

"EPAS is a great opportunity to meet new people and exchange political views. I attended a meeting in Upper Austria with many other young people, which turned out to be a valuable experience. Thanks to EPAS, I connected with people that I am still in contact with today." (E. Kasberger, personal testimony, 2026)






"I was at the EPAS TOGETHER event 2025 in Trnava with students from six other nations. The event was the perfect opportunity to meet new people and make valuable connections. We also took part in many interesting workshops that showed and motivated us to get involved in politics, stand up for issues that affect young people, and create change.
For me, the event especially showed how important it is for young people to participate in political discussions and activities. Politics affects all of us, and even as young people, we have the opportunity to make a difference and contribute to positive change."
(E. Eilmannsberger, personal testimony, 2026)

"Being part of EPAS has been a valuable experience for me, as it has allowed me to gain a deeper insight into the European Union and its role in our everyday lives. Taking part in various activities and events gave me the chance to connect with young people from different backgrounds, discuss current political and social topics, and discover new perspectives and opinions. Most importantly, EPAS has encouraged me to become more interested in European politics and has made me realise how important it is for young people to get involved, share their ideas and actively participate in shaping our society and the future of Europe."
(K. Groß, personal testimony, 2026)

The EPAS-Programme connects ambassador schools and organises meetings with their ambassadors, who work together to provide democratic education for their students. Ambassadors can get invited to Euroscola sessions or other events organised by the European Parliament or their national parliaments which adds transparency and practical knowledge to the educational programme (European Parliament, n.d.).

# Mental Health & Youth Wellbeing

A healthy future
starts with healthy young people.

# THE INTERRAIL STORY

After I arrived in Helsinki, I wanted to take a short walk through the small streets on my way to the hostel. The weather was very sunny but because it started raining I went into a small café and met Leevi there, a young Finnish guy who is engaged in mental health work and cares about young people getting support earlier and more easily.

We started a conversation and ended up talking for hours. He told me that he had struggled with his own mental health in the past and at some point decided to look for professional support. He told me about the pressure at school and the expectations for his future. At the same time, it was hard for him to talk openly about it, because it wasn't easy for him to ask for help and accept it. When he finally looked for support, he noticed that not everyone had the same opportunities and access to help.

In his rural home region, there are fewer services than in Helsinki, and the waiting times are long. Faster support often comes with high costs. That's why Leevi is now working to get young people more involved in prevention projects. Especially because of the high suicide rate among young people, he thinks it's important that their voices are heard. I realised that mental health shouldn't only become important once problems arise.

Young people should have the chance to get support early on and help shape the solutions themselves.



# Mental Health & Well-being

## Who Answers When Young People Need Help?

Imagine a 19-year-old who realises, in the evening, alone in her apartment, that something is terribly wrong. She opens her phone and types what she is feeling. Within seconds, an algorithm answers, a video for explanation appears, and a chatbot is ready to talk.

The next morning, she tries to find professional support, but one service has a waiting list, another costs more than she can afford, and another requires travelling several hours to a different city. So she returns to the system that answered first. Months later, she is invited to a youth consultation on mental health, explains what went wrong and suggests what could have helped. The meeting ends, but she never hears what happened to her recommendation.

These are three different moments, but they raise the same question:
**Are the systems around young people designed around what young people actually need?**

### Mental Health Across Systems

Young people's **mental health and well-being** are shaped by more than access to therapy alone. Healthcare systems, digital environments, financial and geographical circumstances and opportunities to participate in society can all influence their well-being. This chapter therefore examines three interconnected questions: how healthcare and digital life shape young people's mental health, what barriers prevent them from accessing the support they need and how young people themselves can participate in developing better solutions.

## Main issues

### 1 The Asymmetry of Response

Healthcare and digital environments respond to young people's mental-health needs in fundamentally different ways.

### 2 Barriers to Youth Mental Health Support

Financial, geographical, structural, social and age-related barriers can determine whether young people can actually access available support.

### 3 From Being Heard to Having an Impact

Meaningful youth participation requires more than consultation; young people also need pathways to help develop and implement solutions.

## The Asymmetry of Response

### How Do Healthcare and Digital Life Shape Young People's Mental Health?

A young person in distress lives between two systems that respond at very different speeds. The digital environment can answer in milliseconds, while the health system may take months or fail to provide timely support. Around half of young people aged 18 to 29 in the EU reported unmet mental-health care needs in 2021 and 2022, more than double the share among all adults (I). This creates an **asymmetry of response**: distress often goes to whichever system answers first, even though digital platforms are designed primarily for engagement rather than recovery. **Response latency** describes the time between a young person signalling distress and a competent human response, while **duty of care** refers to the obligation to act in that person's interest. Platforms and AI companions may receive signals of distress, but do not carry an equivalent duty.

### Causes

The two systems work fundamentally differently. Digital platforms and AI companions are designed around continued engagement, while public mental-health services are constrained by staff and budgets. In Italy, for example, only 403 child-neuropsychiatry inpatient beds are available against an estimated need of more than 700, and the 2025 *bonus psicologo* (a state voucher for psychotherapy) received around 360,000 applications for a maximum of 6,300 places (II). At the same time, symptoms attributed to stress or "being a teenager" can contribute to medical gaslighting, with conditions such as endometriosis still taking years to diagnose (III). Meanwhile, the digital "fast responder" remains only partly regulated, with ongoing concerns about how AI companions and text-based sentiment analysis fit within current AI Act provisions (IV).

### Consequences

The shift towards digital support is already measurable. In a survey of 3,800 young people aged 11 to 25 across France, Germany, Sweden and Ireland, 51% found it easy to discuss mental health with a chatbot, compared with 49% for healthcare professionals and 37% for psychologists (V). At the same time, 72% of teenagers reported having used an AI companion (VI). Problematic social-media use among adolescents also increased from 7% to 11% between 2018 and 2022, while the European Commission has raised preliminary concerns about design features such as infinite scrolling and personalised feeds (VII). The stakes are significant: in 2023, over 4,800 young people aged 15 to 29 in the EU died from intentional self-harm, making it one of the leading causes of death in this age group (VIII).

## Countermeasures in Action

Europe is not inactive, but current measures address different parts of the problem. The **EU Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health** provides a European framework but sets no binding waiting-time commitment, while the **Digital Services Act guidelines on minors** address exposure and platform design without creating a general duty to provide human mental-health support when distress is detected (IX; X). Austria's "Gesund aus der Krise" demonstrates that faster access is possible by providing children and young people with free psychosocial support, including up to 15 sessions (XI).

## Solutions and Positions to Take

### Member States

By 2028, publish youth mental-health waiting times and work towards a maximum time to first assessment for people under 25, with a defined fallback pathway when the target is missed.

### Health systems

Establish low-threshold first contact that is free, accessible and available to young people without unnecessary administrative barriers

### European Union

Review regulatory gaps concerning AI companions and distress detection and require appropriate pathways towards human support when serious distress is identified.

### Ministries of Education and schools

Introduce practical **digital health literacy**, teaching young people how to assess health claims, understand the limitations of chatbots and recognise when professional support is needed.

All four depend on one step: **making the waiting time for care visible**. Italy already publishes waiting-time information through its AGENAS platform, but not specifically by age and youth mental health (XII). Parma, as European Youth Capital 2027, could provide one setting in which youth-focused wellbeing indicators are discussed and reviewed with young people.

As long as the delay is not measured, the fastest responder in a young person's life may continue to be an algorithm.

## Barriers to Youth Mental Health Support

**What Barriers (e.g. Age, Financials, Country) Stop Young People From Getting The Support They Need?**

Teenagers and young adults often face barriers when trying to access mental-health support. Long waiting times, high costs, geographical distance, workforce capacity, age-related requirements, language and uncertainty around confidentiality can determine whether available services are actually reachable. These barriers can also overlap, meaning that factors such as where a young person lives, their age and their financial situation may ultimately determine whether they can access the support they need.

## Why Access Becomes Unequal

a. Financial and structural barriers: Cost can become particularly relevant for young people who depend financially on their parents or have limited income themselves. Eurostat reported unmet medical needs among people aged 16 and over in the EU, with cost and waiting lists among the reported reasons. (I)

b. Workforce pressure: Mental-health professionals can experience high workloads, emotional exhaustion, burnout and compassion fatigue. (III; IV; V; VI) Workforce pressure also affects service capacity: when systems struggle to recruit and retain qualified professionals, expanding access becomes more difficult. (II)

c. Geographical and social barriers: Young people living in rural or underserved areas may have fewer specialist services nearby. Longer travel distances can create additional time and financial barriers. Research involving migrant and refugee populations has also identified language difficulties, stigma, limited knowledge of services and difficulties navigating healthcare systems as barriers to specialist mental-health support. (VII; VIII)

d. Age and institutional barriers: Rules concerning consent, parental involvement, confidentiality and age limits differ across European countries and services. (X) Uncertainty about confidentiality may influence whether young people feel comfortable seeking help, while age limits can create difficult transition points between youth and adult services.

### Consequences

When young people cannot access mental-health support because of cost, waiting times, geography or institutional barriers, their needs may remain unmet or be addressed later than needed. (I; II) The problem is therefore not simply whether services exist, but whether young people can actually access and use them.

“Availability does not automatically mean accessibility.”

## Existing Responses: Jigsaw Ireland

Jigsaw provides youth mental-health support for young people aged 12–25 through both in-person and online services, combining youth-specific support, easy access and youth involvement. (IX) Its model shows that improving access does not always require building entirely new systems; existing infrastructure can also be strengthened, evaluated and adapted to other contexts.

## Making Mental-Health Support Reachable

### European and national policymakers

Strengthen sustainable investment in youth mental-health services where evidence demonstrates unmet demand.

### Member States

Improve access in rural and underserved regions through combinations of local, outreach and digital services.

### Mental-health organisations and policymakers

Involve young people in the design and evaluation of services intended for them.

### Increasing access should be accompanied

Putting in place sufficient workforce planning so that expanding eligibility does not simply create longer waiting lists. (II)

## From Being Heard to Having an Impact

**What Participative Changes Could Help Young People Build Better Mental Health and Well-Being Across Europe?**

Young people are increasingly more often invited to conferences, surveys and consultations about issues that directly affect their lives. However, participation should not end when the consultation ends. European youth participation should move from consultation towards co-creation and implementation, giving young people opportunities to identify problems, develop solutions and remain involved when those solutions are tested and implemented. (I)(II)(VI)

Young people with direct experience of these challenges may identify barriers that are difficult to see from an institutional perspective. Their lived experience should not replace scientific or professional expertise, but complement it. (II)(III)




### Why Participation Often Stops Too Early

Existing European structures already recognise meaningful youth participation. The EU Youth Strategy calls for youth involvement in policies affecting young people (I), while WHO/Europe's Youth4Health Network aims to engage young people as partners in health and well-being decision-making. (II) However, being invited to express an opinion is not necessarily the same as having influence over what happens afterwards. The key distinction is between consultation, where young people are asked what they think, and co-creation, where they remain involved in developing, implementing and evaluating solutions. (II)(IV)(VII)

### Consequences of Participation Without Influence

Participation can matter both for systems and for young people themselves. Young people with direct experience of mental healthcare, disability, chronic illness, cyberbullying or accessibility barriers can contribute lived-experience knowledge that complements professional and scientific expertise. (III)(VIII)

At the same time, meaningful participation may strengthen belonging, purpose, agency and self-efficacy by allowing young people to actively shape issues that affect their lives. (III)

However, participation is not automatically positive. UNICEF emphasises that it must be safe, meaningful and sensitive to mental health and psychosocial well-being. (III) The question should therefore not only be "Did we listen to young people?", but "What were young people actually able to change?"

### European Approaches

The EU Youth Strategy, WHO/Europe Youth4Health, UNICEF and Council of Europe approaches already demonstrate a move towards more meaningful youth participation. (I)(II)(III)(IV) The remaining challenge is strengthening the pathway from participation to implementation.

One emerging approach is Youth Policy Hackathons or Youth Solutions Labs, where young people work alongside policymakers, researchers and civil society on real societal challenges.(IX)

An upcoming example is being developed by 21.wienerschule (21.ws), an Austrian project-development NGO, through a funded HPV hackathon for young people aged 12–30, which will take place in 2027. (V)

Data will be collected to evaluate its impact and explore the model as a prototype for social innovation, scientific participation and youth-led project development. As the project is yet to take place, it cannot provide evidence of effectiveness at present. (V)

## From Consultation to Action

A stronger participation model should follow:
**Problem → Co-creation → Resources → Pilot → Evaluation → Implementation**, ensuring that youth participation does not end after an event, awareness or consultation. (II)(III)(IV)(VI)(IX).

### Policymakers and participating organisations

Ensure that financial circumstances, disability, chronic illness, caring responsibilities, language or geography do not prevent young people from participating. (III)(IV)

### EU funding programmes

Establish an EU Youth Solutions Challenge or similar mechanism that provides selected youth-developed solutions with funding, mentoring and institutional support for pilot implementation.

**EU institutions and Member States**

Establish a right to feedback, explaining which youth recommendations were implemented, which were not and why. (III)(IV)

**European Commission and Member States**

Create permanent youth co-creation structures throughout relevant policy processes. (I)(IV)(X)

The goal should move beyond simply giving young people a voice. Young people need **a seat, resources and a pathway to action to shape their future**.

## From Observers to Co-Shapers

**Linkback**

The three issues show that youth mental health cannot be understood only as an individual or clinical matter. Young people are affected by how systems respond to distress, whether professional support is actually accessible and whether they can influence the systems shaping their lives.

## Call to Action

- **Reduce the asymmetry of response:** measure youth mental-health waiting times and strengthen timely access to competent, free of charge, human support.
- **Make support genuinely accessible:** address and start better data on financial, geographical, workforce, social and institutional barriers. To improve care.
- **Create safer digital environments and digital education:** improve digital health literacy and clarify responsibilities around emerging AI and platform-based interactions with distressed young people. Educate early.
- **Move from consultation to co-creation:** create spaces for involving young people in designing, implementing and evaluating policies and services affecting them and their future.
- **Connect participation with implementation:** provide youth-developed solutions (Innovation Labs, Hackathons e.g.) with resources, pilots and institutional feedback.

# COUNTRY CASE STUDY – AUSTRIA

## "Gesund aus der Krise" – Low-Threshold Mental Health Support for Children and Young People



"Gesund aus der Krise" ("Healthy Out of the Crisis") is a national Austrian programme providing children, adolescents, and young adults aged 0 to 21 with free, low-threshold access to clinical-psychological, health-psychological, psychotherapeutic, and music-therapeutic counselling. A central hotline and online registration act as the single point of entry, matching applicants to a provider based on residence, treatment focus, language, and gender, usually within days. Each participant receives up to 15 free sessions, individually or in groups; those aged 14+ can register without a parent or guardian.

It is commissioned and funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry for social affairs and health (BMSGPK, now BMASGPK) and delivered by the Austrian Professional Association of Psychologists (BÖP) with the Austrian Federal Association for Psychotherapy (ÖBVP), which coordinate an existing network of practitioners rather than requiring new infrastructure. Applied nationwide since April 2022, it has expanded through successive funding phases – GadK I (2022), II (2023), III, and the current phase IV, financed through June 2027 – with the budget growing from about €12.2 million/year to over €35 million in the latest extension. The provider pool has grown to around 1,600 professionals offering 28 languages, and the programme is cited domestically as an international best-practice example.

### Starting Point

Before the programme, Austria's regular psychosocial care system for children and adolescents already could not keep pace with demand, leaving long waiting times and a fragmented referral landscape. COVID-19 sharply worsened this: lockdowns, disrupted schooling, illness or bereavement in families, and possibly domestic tension added substantial strain, and roughly a fifth of girls and a tenth of boys surveyed in Austrian schools around 2022 showed signs of depression. No dedicated, free, rapid-access national programme existed to catch this pandemic-driven surge, and existing services were, by the ministry's own assessment, already at or beyond capacity.

## Contribution to the Issue

Since 2022, roughly 50,000 children and young people have gained access to help, nearly half of whom otherwise could have not afforded treatment. A University of Innsbruck evaluation found that most clients felt better after treatment, with significant declines in psychological and physical complaints; most caregivers saw improvement in their child and felt better equipped to help going forward.

Reach has broadened over time − the share of boys rose from about 29% (2022) to 41%, and roughly a third of clients now have a migration background, aided by a multilingual provider pool. Funded through June 2027, the programme is expected to face continued or rising demand arising from war, economic uncertainty, and social-media exposure; evaluators note that as a temporary scheme layered on regular care, it does not fully solve the need for long-term support for young people with chronic or severe conditions.



## What Can Be Learned and Scaled

Key transferable elements: a single national hotline with automated matching removes the two biggest barriers to youth mental health care – waiting times and unclear referral paths; delivering through existing professional associations enabled fast rollout without new infrastructure; built-in independent evaluation allowed evidence-based adjustment across funding phases; and deliberate multilingual provision increased reach among migrant-background youth.

The main limitation to consider: a time-limited, renewable funding scheme does not by itself provide long-term care for chronic or severe cases - a future or adapted version elsewhere should pair this core model with a clearer transition pathway into permanent care.

# Migration, Conflict & Belonging

Where we come from should never determine where we belong.

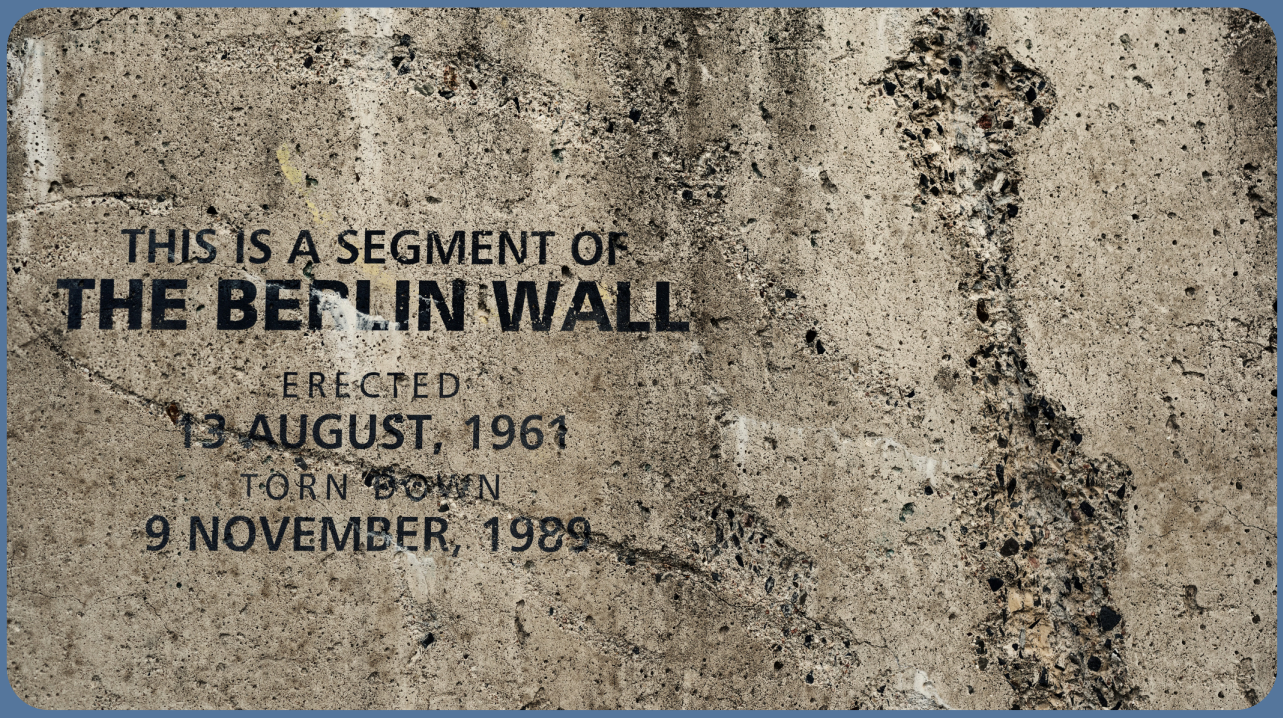
# THE INTERRAIL STORY

Berlin. Another amazing city, another interesting person I met: Eren was born and raised in Germany, but he has Turkish roots from his parents who are first-generation immigrants. This, however, isn't only cultural enrichment for him, but it comes with many difficulties and prejudices.

Although his parents run their own small restaurant and he is doing exceptionally well in school, they cannot afford to send him to the best school in the area – a potential springboard to his dream university and career. Even if they had the money to support him, he would still face many wrong assumptions about his academic performance and lifestyle.

Most people don't value his diverse background, but view it as something bad, a liability. But since he was a child he has been able to switch between and translate the two languages fluently – many adults can't do that. At times he still has to help his parents fill out complex official documents, something no child should have to do simply because there is not enough support. Also, when he's out with his friends, walking through the streets of the city they grew up in, they often get side glances as if they were about to do something bad.

All of these are reasons Eren tries to blend in as well as he can, but sometimes that's just not enough. Sometimes people only see the prejudice they hold and not who he really is as a person.



# From Integration to Shared Belonging and Equal Participation

## Standing on the Threshold

Imagine a teenager whose parents are immigrants. At home, they speak one language, follow family traditions and may have a strong connection to the culture and places their family comes from. At school, they speak another language, follow different social rules and may feel pressure to fit in. They may sometimes feel "too foreign" in the country where they live, while also feeling "too different" when visiting their family's country of origin.

Now imagine a long-time resident of a small town where the population is changing quickly. Their familiar surroundings and communities are changing, and they may feel disconnected or uncertain about what these changes mean for their neighbourhood, housing situation, public services or social cohesion.

At the same time, another person with a migration history may have spent years studying or working in Europe, but is still employed in a job far below their qualifications because their degree or professional experience from another country is not fully recognised.

These are different experiences, but they raise connected questions: **Who gets to feel at home? Who gets recognised for who they are and what they can contribute? And how can European societies respond to social change without forcing people into simplified categories?**

## Migration, Identity, Belonging, and Social Integration

Migration is not the same experience for everyone. A young person who moves to Europe to study or work has different reasons and needs than a family escaping war or insecurity. Migrants can differ in their economic situation, legal status, education, language skills, and family background. People who were born in Europe to immigrant parents can have different experiences than people who have recently arrived.

The term "migrant" therefore includes many different groups, such as workers, students, people joining their families, refugees, and asylum seekers. Their reasons for migration and their experiences can be very different. Research by the OECD and European Commission shows that migrants have different backgrounds and that their integration outcomes vary depending on factors such as education, language skills, and length of residence (OECD & European Commission, 2023).

Questions about identity, belonging, and what feels like home have consequently become important social issues. However, people from minority or immigrant backgrounds should not be treated as one homogeneous group. Their experiences can differ according to generation, language skills, financial situation, and personal history.

Belonging means more than simply living in a place. It also means feeling safe, being treated equally, and being able to participate in society. Language skills, education, employment, social networks, and institutional support can help people feel included. At the same time, discrimination, bullying, racism, and exclusion can make belonging more difficult.

Integration should therefore not be understood simply as the responsibility of migrants. Host communities and institutions also influence whether migrants feel accepted and whether they have genuine opportunities to participate in society.

## Key Issues Overview

### Barriers to Belonging, Identity, and Social Acceptance

People living between different cultures may face language barriers, social exclusion, identity struggles, discrimination, racism, and othering. These experiences can make it harder to participate in society and feel accepted.

### Social Division, Public Concerns, and Institutional Responses

Local communities may worry about rapid cultural changes, housing, employment, public services or social cohesion. These concerns should be taken seriously while being separated from prejudice, misinformation, and stereotypes.

### From Employment to Qualification-Appropriate Participation

Migrants may enter employment without being able to use the qualifications and skills they already possess. Difficulties with qualification recognition, language, professional networks, recruitment systems, and discrimination can result in persistent mismatch of skills and overqualification.

## Barriers to Belonging, Identity, and Social Acceptance

**How do language, identity, discrimination, and access to social participation shape migrants' sense of belonging in Europe?**

Social inclusion means having equal access to education, work, and society without having to give up one's cultural background. Feeling at home does not mean giving up family traditions, religion or one's first language.

For people with migration histories, identity and belonging cannot always be reduced to a choice between an "origin country" and a "host country". Home may be connected to family, memories, language, traditions, familiar places, and emotional security. Language is especially important because it can connect a person to family history and cultural background while also becoming part of a new everyday identity. A person can therefore feel attached to several places and cultures at the same time without one belonging cancelling out the other. (I, II)

Nevertheless, finding this balance can be difficult. Some people may feel "too foreign" in the country where they live, while also feeling "too different" when visiting their family's country of origin. Questions such as "Where are you really from?", or assumptions based on someone's name, appearance or accent, can create a gap between self-defined identity and external attribution. People may experience different expectations at home and outside the family and may feel that others expect them to have one clear national or cultural identity. (I, II)

Language barriers can make school, work, and everyday communication harder. Discrimination and bullying can make people feel even less safe and accepted. Social inclusion is therefore not simply a question of whether a person has physically entered a country. It is also a question of whether they can participate in society without being expected to abandon parts of themselves.



### Causes

The challenges around identity and inclusion can come from both personal situations and wider social problems. **Individual factors** can include: limited language skills, few support networks, difficult past experiences, and stress from balancing different cultural expectations. A person may be navigating several languages and social environments at the same time while trying to understand where they belong.

**Structural factors** can include unequal access to housing and jobs, complicated administrative processes, and racism. Migrants may face barriers that cannot be solved simply by individual motivation because the institutions around them make participation more difficult.

Language learning can become an important part of building a new identity. It turns problematic, however, when learning the language of one's country of residence is understood as replacing an existing language or cultural background rather than adding another layer to a person's identity.

Integration should therefore be understood as a **two-way process**: individuals should respect the laws and participate in society, while society should provide equal opportunities and actively fight discrimination.

## Consequences

If social exclusion is not addressed, it can affect both individuals and society.

At an individual level, repeated exclusion or othering can contribute to **loneliness, lower self-esteem, identity confusion, insecurity, and stress**. People may feel like they must constantly explain or justify who they are or like other people are deciding their identity for them. This can make the question "Where is home?" difficult to answer.

At a social level, limited contact between migrants and local residents can strengthen stereotypes and misunderstandings. Social exclusion can contribute to lower participation, less trust between communities and stronger divisions.

There can also be institutional consequences. Schools and social services may face more pressure when some groups cannot fully participate in society.

At the same time, multilingual and hybrid identities can be a strength. When recognised positively, they allow people to combine different cultural influences rather than having to choose only one.

A person can belong to several places and cultures simultaneously. (I, II)

# Solutions and Positions to Take

### Public institutions

Avoid treating mixed or multiple identities as incomplete and allow people to define for themselves what "home" means.

### Education systems

Treat language learning as an additional connection rather than a replacement for a first language or cultural background.

### National and local governments

Reduce structural barriers in housing, employment and public services and strengthen anti-discrimination mechanisms.

### European Union

Continue developing a shared European sense of belonging that adds another layer to cultural, national, regional, and family identities.

### Schools and education systems

Strengthen intercultural education, multilingual support, and anti-bullying measures while treating students' different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as part of the school environment rather than as deficits.

### Schools and communities

Use models such as QUIMS as inspiration for longterm, locally adapted approaches in which institutions, rather than individual students alone, take responsibility for reducing inequality.

People should not have to **choose one identity in order to belong**. Europe can become part of the answer to "Where do I belong?" without demanding that other parts of identity disappear. A shared European "we" should therefore offer an additional layer of belonging alongside cultural, national, regional, and family identities. (III, IV)

## Social Division, Public Concerns, and Institutional Responses

**How can Europe address concerns about migration and social change while distinguishing legitimate problems from prejudice, misinformation, and stereotypes?**

Migration is an important social and political issue in Europe, but public perceptions of migration are divided. Some people see migration as an opportunity for cultural exchange, demographic development, and economic contribution. Others are concerned about employment, housing, public services, security or cultural change.



These concerns should not simply be dismissed. At the same time, they should not automatically be treated as evidence that migrants are responsible for every social problem. A realistic approach requires separating **legitimate concerns from prejudice, misinformation, and stereotypes**.

Local communities can experience rapid demographic and cultural change differently. A long-time resident of a small town, for example, may feel that familiar surroundings and community structures are changing quickly. At the same time, migrants may experience the same transformation from the perspective of someone trying to find housing, work, education, and social acceptance.

### Causes

Negative attitudes towards migration can be influenced by economic insecurity, political debates, media coverage, and personal experiences. Housing provides one example of why these issues need to be examined carefully. Migration can contribute to increased demand for housing, but housing shortages also depend on other factors such as limited construction, building costs, urban planning, and a lack of affordable housing. Migration should therefore not automatically be treated as the main cause of housing problems. Similar distinctions are necessary when discussing employment, public services or crime. A concern can be real without the explanation attached to it necessarily being correct. The challenge for policy-makers is therefore twofold: they need to listen to citizens who are experiencing uncertainty or pressure, while also preventing unsupported assumptions from becoming discrimination against migrants.

### Consequences

Ignoring public concerns can reduce trust in governments and increase social tensions. If people feel that their concerns cannot be discussed openly, political, and social divisions can become stronger.

However, accepting negative assumptions without evidence can also lead to stereotypes and discrimination against migrants. This can make integration more difficult and weaken trust between different communities.

Social division therefore becomes self-reinforcing: limited interaction can increase misunderstanding, while misunderstanding can increase social distance. If migrants and local residents have few opportunities to meet and participate together, stereotypes can remain unchallenged.

The objective should not be to eliminate disagreement. Diverse societies will continue to contain different views about migration and social change. The objective should be to create ways of discussing these differences using evidence, dialogue, and mutual respect.

## Existing Responses

Governments can use **anti-discrimination policies, integration programmes, and public information campaigns**. However, simply telling people that their opinions are wrong is unlikely to resolve underlying concerns.

Policy-makers should instead listen to concerns and examine them individually. Concerns about crime should be compared with crime statistics, concerns about employment with labour-market data, and concerns about housing with housing and population data.

This makes it possible to distinguish real structural problems from misconceptions and to develop realistic solutions rather than assigning complex social problems to one population group.

Social integration programmes can also create opportunities for interaction. Language courses, education and employment programmes, sports clubs, volunteering, and community activities can support integration, but these opportunities need to be accessible and affordable.

Integration should remain a **two-way process**: migrants should learn the language, respect laws and participate in society, while host communities should create opportunities for interaction and acceptance. The goal should be mutual understanding rather than complete assimilation.

## Solutions and Positions to Take

### European and national institutions

Improve access to reliable data so that public debates can distinguish actual social trends from unsupported assumptions.

### Media and public institutions

Strengthen responsible communication about migration and avoid presenting migrants as a single homogeneous group.

### Local communities

Create more opportunities for migrants and local residents to meet through sports, volunteering, education, cultural activities, and community projects.

### Integration programmes

Ensure that language learning, education, employment, and community participation are affordable and accessible.

### Governments

Create transparent mechanisms through which local residents can raise concerns about migration, housing, employment, and public services and receive evidence-based responses.

### Policy-makers

Address underlying structural problems such as housing shortages, labour-market insecurity, and pressure on public services directly instead of automatically attributing them to migration.

The aim should not be to tell communities what they are allowed to worry about. It should be to ensure that concerns can be discussed openly and then examined against reliable evidence. This creates the possibility of distinguishing real problems from misconceptions while also protecting migrants from stereotypes and discrimination.

## From Employment to Qualification-Appropriate Participation

**What barriers prevent migrants from using their existing qualifications and skills and how can Europe improve access to qualification-appropriate employment?**

Labour-market integration is not only about whether migrants find work. It is also about whether they can use the **qualifications and skills they already have**.

OECD and European Commission data show a persistent **overqualification gap**. Across the EU, 47% of tertiary-educated immigrants are either overqualified or unemployed, compared with 30% of the native-born population. Austria illustrates the wider European pattern: in 2021, 39% of highly educated foreign-born workers were overqualified, compared with 26% of native-born workers. (I)

This suggests that finding a job does not necessarily mean that integration into the labour market has been successful. A person may have entered employment while still being unable to use their education, professional experience or specialist skills. Qualification-appropriate employment is therefore an important part of both social inclusion and economic participation.



### Causes

The causes differ between countries but recur across Europe.

One major barrier is the **recognition of foreign qualifications**. Qualifications obtained outside the country
of residence may not automatically be recognised or may require complex procedures. Foreign-earned qualifications are particularly vulnerable to being undervalued. Other barriers include limited host-country language proficiency, weak professional networks, unfamiliar recruitment systems, and discrimination.

Other barriers include limited host-country language proficiency, weak professional networks, unfamiliar recruitment systems and discrimination.

Language is particularly relevant because professional language requirements can differ from everyday language skills. Someone may be able to communicate in daily life but still require profession-specific language support to work in a regulated or highly specialised field.

Professional networks can also influence access to qualification-appropriate employment. People who are unfamiliar with local recruitment systems may not know where to apply, which qualifications are recognised, how professional licensing works or how to demonstrate international experience to employers.

Another problem is that migrants are not always **supported sufficiently or continuously** when entering the labour market. Guidance on recognition procedures, career pathways, professional networking, and moving from an initial job into qualification-appropriate employment can be fragmented or difficult to access.

The problem therefore does not necessarily end when a migrant obtains their first job. Support may be needed afterwards to enable career progression and better use of existing skills. EU-wide evidence also indicates that obtaining a host-country degree strongly reduces the overqualification gap. (I, II, III)



## Consequences

For migrants, skills mismatch can mean **lower earnings, slower career progression, and reduced professional recognition**.

A person who is trained for a professional occupation but works substantially below their qualification level may lose income and opportunities while also experiencing frustration because their existing competencies are not fully recognised.

For European societies and employers, the consequences are broader: skills mismatch means that existing human capital is underused, while many sectors face labour shortages.

The European Commission notes that migration has contributed substantially to recent EU employment growth. Better use of migrants' skills is therefore not only an inclusion issue but also an economic matter. (II)

The question is consequently not simply whether migrants are working. It is whether European labour markets are able to recognise and use the competencies that migrants already possess.

## Countermeasures in Act

The **EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027** promotes faster skills assessment, validation, upskilling, vocational education, mentoring and cooperation between labour-market actors. Member States also use recognition services and language programmes. (III)

These measures address several of the structural barriers that migrants face. However, existing support does not always reach migrants in a sufficiently individual, continuous or easily accessible way. Access and procedures also remain uneven across professions and countries.

The continued European focus on stronger cooperation, faster recognition and ongoing upskilling reflects the need for more consistent support throughout the integration process.

The central lesson is that integration should not stop at the point at which someone gets **any** job. Labour-market support should also ask whether the person is able to progress towards work that corresponds more closely to their education, professional experience and actual competencies.

## Solutions and Positions to Take

**European and national policy-makers**

Create more transparent and understandable recognition procedures for foreign qualifications.

**Employment services**

Offer continuous individual guidance rather than ending support once a migrant has obtained initial employment.

**Labour-market institutions**

Develop bridge programmes that help migrants move from an initial job into employment that matches their qualifications better.

**Employers**

Strengthen skills-based recruitment and improve their ability to evaluate international qualifications and professional experience.

### Member States

Provide profession-specific language support alongside general language courses, particularly in occupations where specialist terminology and communication are essential.

### European Union

Continue strengthening cooperation between recognition authorities, employment services, education institutions, and employers.

The objective should not merely be rapid employment, but qualification-appropriate employment that allows people to contribute at the level of their actual competencies.

## From Observers to Co-Shapers

### Linkback

The three issues show that migration and integration cannot be understood only as questions of whether migrants adapt to a new country.

Belonging is influenced by whether people can maintain aspects of their identity while participating equally in society. Social cohesion depends on whether both migrants and local residents have opportunities to express concerns and interact with each other. Economic integration depends not only on whether migrants work, but whether their qualifications and skills are recognised and used appropriately.

1. **Move from assimilation to belonging:** recognise that people can have multiple cultural, linguistic, and national identities. People should not have to choose one identity in order to belong.
2. **Make inclusion a two-way process:** provide migrants with accessible opportunities for language learning, education, employment, and social participation while requiring institutions and communities to create genuine opportunities for interaction and equal treatment.
3. **Strengthen schools as places of inclusion:** use long-term, institution-based approaches such as QUIMS as inspiration for adapting schools to linguistic, cultural, and social diversity. Provide additional resources to schools facing greater challenges and support them in developing solutions suited to their own circumstances.
4. **Replace assumptions with evidence:** listen to concerns about migration, housing, employment, crime, and public services, but examine each concern using reliable data. Distinguish real structural problems from misconceptions, stereotypes, and misinformation.

The examples of multilingual and hybrid identities, evidence-based approaches to public concerns, qualification recognition and the QUIMS school model point towards the same broader principle: integration is a shared responsibility between individuals, institutions, and society.

Successful integration does not mean that everyone has to live or think in the same way. It means creating a society where migrants can participate, residents feel heard, different identities can coexist, and disagreements can be discussed openly.

5. **Create more opportunities for interaction:** expand accessible sports clubs, volunteering, community activities, education programmes, and other spaces where migrants and local residents can interact in everyday life.

6. **Recognise skills, not only employment:** improve foreign-qualification recognition, profession-specific language support, bridge programmes, and skills-based recruitment so that migrants can move beyond initial employment towards work that corresponds to their actual competencies.

7. **Make integration support continuous:** support should not end when a person finds their first job, completes a language course or enters a school. Individual guidance should remain available as people progress through education, employment, and wider social participation.

8. **Build a shared European layer of belonging:** a common European identity should not replace national, regional, family, linguistic or cultural identities. The European idea of "United in diversity" can instead provide an additional layer of belonging in which different backgrounds remain compatible with participation in a common European society.

The goal should therefore move beyond asking whether migrants have **integrated enough**. The more useful question is whether European societies have created the conditions in which people with different backgrounds can **belong, participate, contribute and be recognised**.

# COUNTRY CASE STUDY – SWITZERLAND

## Countermeasures in Act: Intercultural Education and Schools

Intercultural education, greater representation of people with migration histories, and a more positive understanding of multilingualism can help normalise hybrid and multiple identities.



One practical example comes from Switzerland: Quality in Multicultural Schools (QUIMS) in the Canton of Zürich. QUIMS is a school-development programme designed to counteract educational disadvantages in schools with many students from multilingual, migrant, and socially disadvantaged families. It focuses on three areas: language development, academic achievement, and social integration. Rather than expecting individual students to overcome these challenges on their own, QUIMS supports schools in changing their teaching and school practices. (I)

QUIMS began as a project in 1996 and later became part of cantonal school legislation. Today, around 160 schools participate and receive professional and financial support from the canton. The Canton's education authority, the Volksschulamt, supports participating schools through training and networking opportunities. Annual funding can be used for additional teacher training, school-development consulting, student mentoring, parent education, and materials for multilingual libraries. The amount depends on the size of the school and its "Mix Index", which reflects the composition of the student population. The average is around CHF 40,000 (~42,000 EUR) per school per year. (I)

QUIMS was developed because schools with many students from migrant and socially disadvantaged families face particular struggles when it comes to promoting good learning outcomes and providing equal educational opportunities. (III) The programme therefore does not focus only on individual students, but on changing how schools and teaching respond to these challenges. Schools develop their own measures according to their situation, which means that there is not just one version of QUIMS: the programme is adapted to the needs and conditions of each school. (II)

## Contribution to educational equality

An evaluation commissioned by the Canton of Zurich found that QUIMS strengthened school development and created structures and processes for professional learning within schools. The programme also supported the participation and integration of students and parents and contributed to a learning environment that was generally perceived positively. (II)

Nevertheless, the evaluation also points out some clear limits: the data did not allow the researchers to determine whether QUIMS actually caused improvements in students' academic performance. Students in QUIMS schools showed similar progress rates in mathematics, reading, and vocabulary as students in non-QUIMS schools. However, their overall performance remained below the cantonal average. (II)

At the same time, the evaluation shows that having enough resources is essential. The funding and support helped schools work on their development but were still insufficient for long-term improvement. This is important when applying the model elsewhere: inclusion needs long-term investment and support, rather than short-term projects that end after a few years. (II)



# Appendices

## A. Country Case Study Index

| Chapter | Case Study |
|---|---|
| AI & Youth Participation | Germany: Kickfair's DEMOKRATIEdialog |
| Gender Equality | Poland: Girls Future Ready Foundation |
| Education System Reform | Italy: Discentis |
| Democratic Participation | EU: European Parliament Ambassador School (EPAS) programme |
| Mental Health | Austria: Gesund aus der Krise |
| Migration & Belonging | Switzerland: QUIMS, intercultural education in schools |

## B. Glossary of Shared Terminology

| Term | Working Definition |
|---|---|
| AI literacy | Knowledge, skills, and attitudes that let someone understand how AI systems work, critically evaluate their outputs, and make informed decisions about their use. |
| Algorithmic opacity | The lack of insight into the criteria by which an AI system evaluates individuals. |
| Meaningful participation | Participation that satisfies all four of Lundy's (2007) conditions — space, voice, audience, and influence — not just the right to be heard. |
| Participatory AI | An approach to AI development and governance that takes non-technical forms of expertise as seriously as technical expertise. |

# C. List of Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Full Term |
|---|---|
| AI | Artificial Intelligence |
| ALTAI | Assessment List for Trustworthy AI (EU) |
| EU | European Union |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| NIST | National Institute of Standards and Technology (US) |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| VAWG | Violence Against Women and Girls |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |

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| Gender Equality | Kaja Posnik | Alena Petric, Ariadna Moldoveanu |
| Education System Reform | Krzysztof Malinowski | Ellen Grösel, Hannes Wimmer, Simone Trippetta |
| Democratic Participation | Leonhard Kick | Ida Tscherry, Sophie Gahleitner, Timna Graschl, Mirus Ponon |
| Mental Health | Rita Fussenegger | Emilie Alge, Lexy Gössler, Hannes Wimmer, Julia Gawin |
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# GENeration Changemaker
## Cohort 2026



### Nawres Hassen
**20, Liechtenstein**

Nawres is committed to opening up new perspectives for young people and breaking down barriers to education. Through school visits and a collection of success stories from former secondary school students, she strengthens young people's confidence and highlights alternative educational pathways. In the long term, she aims to establish a foundation that supports women and children in particular by providing financial assistance, mentoring, and digital learning opportunities, enabling better access to education and greater equality of opportunity.

### Felix Von Der Geest
**20, UK**




Felix is a filmmaker and journalist who founded Politics Relaxed at age 15 to give young people a voice in politics and directed the documentary "Who Cares? Young People vs Politics". Through his work, he has interviewed senior political figures and presented youth perspectives directly to policymakers across Europe.



### Kaja Posnik
**23, UK**

Kaja, originally from Poland, now based in the UK, is committed to empowering girls and young women internationally. As Programme Director at the Girls Future Ready Foundation she supports hundreds of young people worldwide in developing leadership, networking, and future-ready skills. She also has experience as a Youth Ambassador and jury member for global innovation and entrepreneurship programmes, mentoring young changemakers as they bring their ideas to life. With a background in neuroscience and a passion for theatre, she combines science, art, and social impact. She is currently developing projects focused on wellbeing, neuroaesthetics, and interdisciplinary approach to sciences and the arts, including the initiative How Brain Arts. In the long term, she aims to contribute globally to women's empowerment, health, as well as inclusive societies.

### Simone Tripetta
**22, Italy**



Simone is committed to empowering young people for the future through innovative learning methods. In collaboration with Discentis, he brings topics such as robotics, 3D printing, and artificial intelligence into schools. Through hands-on STEAM workshops, he promotes both technical skills and essential future-ready and social competencies. In addition, he volunteers in child and youth work, where he develops educational and community activities and strengthens connections between young people and their families.



### Leonardo Turati
**16, Italy**

Leonardo is very passionate about innovation, especially when applied in traditional sectors. He believes that with the systematic implementation of correct researches, infrastructures and technologies any major problem could be solved, and every field could be renewed to face 21st century challenges without losing its identity. As still an high-school student in Monza, Italy, he is trying to do so in the Italian cultural sector with his project "Holo": a digital platform directed to theaters.

### Nooshin Pourkamali
**25, Germany**



Nooshin develops technological solutions to strengthen democratic participation and amplify marginalised voices. As a student and researcher in computational linguistics, she works on AI-powered tools to analyse disinformation, hate speech, and societal narratives. At the same time, she is internationally involved in human rights, youth participation, and supporting women and disadvantaged communities, including as the founder of the Volunty initiative and as a youth representative at international conferences. Her goal is to harness technology strategically to promote social cohesion, information integrity, and greater equality of opportunity.

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### Ellen Grösel
**19, Germany**

Ellen initiates and leads projects that address social challenges in tangible ways. She creates opportunities for young people to get involved and demonstrates how individual engagement can lead to measurable impact. She introduced free menstrual hygiene products at her school and organised a DKMS donor registration drive that made a tangible contribution to saving lives. She has also been involved in civic education and prevention work, including through a petition advocating for school social work and the organisation of a talk on radicalisation and preventing right-wing extremism.

### Krzysztof Malinowski
**19, Poland**



Krzysztof is committed to youth political participation, social cohesion, and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. As a youth representative at the district and city levels in Warsaw, he initiated projects focused on intergenerational dialogue, youth participation, and safe spaces for young people. Today, he is involved with the GrowSPACE Foundation, where he coordinates projects supporting LGBTQ+ youth and young people experiencing mental health crises, while advocating for greater equality and visibility.



### Sofiia Stoikova
**18, Poland**

Sofiia uses culture as a tool to strengthen community, hope, and social cohesion. After fleeing Ukraine, she organised cultural events together with other young people, reaching more than 500 people, and contributed to the publication of an intergenerational poetry collection. Today, she is involved with the Unity Foundation, where she supports creative and social projects and works to bring people together through art, dialogue, and collective action.

### Emmanuel Mirus Ponon
**25, Belgium**



Mirus founded the ASEAN Youth Advocates Network (AYAN), connecting young people across Southeast Asia and strengthening their participation in social and political processes. AYAN has grown into a regional network empowering young people through youth dialogues, leadership programmes, and partnerships. A graduate of Development Studies and double master's graduate from KU Leuven in Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies and International Politics, Emmanuel's work has been recognised by Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia and Tatler Asia. He is committed to building inclusive participation structures and empowering others to recognise their potential as changemakers.



### Leonhard Kick
**23, Schwitzerland**

Leonhard empowers young people to actively address social and environmental challenges. As co-founder of ArborMundi, he initiated educational projects on climate action, biodiversity, and global justice, reaching numerous students. He is also involved with Swiss Youth for Climate, advocating for climate-just policies at both the national and international levels. Through his podcast "Age of Meaning," he further inspires young people to take responsibility and help shape positive change.

### Isabel Herren
**18, Switzerland**



Isabell combines entrepreneurial thinking with social responsibility. Together with her team, she founded the social enterprise "necessity+" as part of the YES Company Programme, developing sustainable products in collaboration with people with disabilities. The initiative won the Coop Sustainability Award 2025, highlighted the abilities of people with disabilities, and promoted inclusion in practice. She is also committed to educational equity by fundraising for scholarships at a partner school in Zambia and developing initiatives that support the integration of refugee young people into society through learning, personal encounters, and cultural exchange.

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### Julia Gawin
**17, Vienna, Austria**

Julia is committed to educational equity, social inclusion, and responsible leadership. She translated an AI course by Code.org into German to make digital knowledge more accessible and works as a trainer at Girls' Hackathons, supporting girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Lilya Burhan
**19, Vienna, Austria**



Lilya creates spaces for exchange, critical thinking, and social dialogue. Through her youth forum "Muntada al-Shabab" and its accompanying podcast, she brings together young people from diverse backgrounds to engage in open discussions about politics, identity, migration, and social issues. Her goal is to encourage young people to use their voices, share perspectives, and learn from one another.



### Timna Graschl
**19, Carinthia, Austria**

Timna is committed to strengthening youth political participation and social justice. As a law and economics student she is eager to continuously learn about socioeconomic structures shaping society and contributing to forming these. She was a member of the Villach Youth Council, where she initiated projects focused on access, equity, and diversity, representing young people's interests at the municipal level. Through her engagement with the current project Pfandl she raised awareness to homelessness in Vienna and is now working to increase youth voter turnout and strengthen democratic participation in the long term.

### Sophie Gahleitner
**17, Upper Austria, Austria**



Sophie advocates for youth participation at the regional, national, and EU levels through her involvement in the Scouts. As a youth leader, she supports children and young people in their personal development and works to strengthen values such as responsibility and community. She is also politically active in youth affairs and aims to play an active role in shaping education and social change in the long term.



### Tobias Möbius
**22, Vienna, Austria**

Tobias combines social engagement with the goal of helping shape the digital future responsibly. As a youth group leader and volunteer paramedic, he has supported people directly. Today, he explores how artificial intelligence can be regulated in an ethical and socially responsible way. In the long term, he hopes to contribute at the intersection of technology, business, and politics, helping to integrate European values into the digital transformation.

### Alejandro Tomeniuc
**20, Lower Austria, Austria**



Alejandro is passionate about cultural exchange, diversity, and civic engagement. Through projects within the Erasmus+ framework, international collaboration, and his participation in public speaking competitions, he works to connect young people and amplify their voices. He is particularly interested in how technology can be used to improve social processes and support people in their everyday lives.

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### Ida Tscherry
**17, Upper Austria, Austria**

Ida is committed to raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and strengthening social responsibility. Through her participation in initiatives such as the Austrian Climate Youth Council 2025 and international youth programmes like EPAS, she advocates for exchange, tolerance, and the active inclusion of young people in political processes. She is particularly passionate about taking responsibility in everyday life and inspiring others to act with respect, solidarity, and a future-oriented mindset.

### Florian Huber
**20, Lower Austria, Austria**



Florian creates spaces where young people can actively shape political and social issues. Through his involvement in the European Youth Parliament, UNICEF Austria, and other youth initiatives, he connects organisations, fosters collaboration, and strengthens young people's participation in political processes. He is particularly committed to building sustainable partnerships in the fields of children's rights and youth participation.



### Lexy Gössler
**16, Styria, Austria**

Lexy has been committed to social change, climate action, and social justice from a young age. She has organised fundraising initiatives, advocates for mental health awareness in schools, and works to strengthen gender equality and violence prevention within the education system. In the long term, she hopes to advocate for women's and children's rights through a career in psychology, law, or politics.

### Clara Johanna Fersterer
**16, Vorarlberg, Austria**



Clara has been committed to climate and environmental protection, equality, and social participation from a young age. As a Climate Peer, she developed and led her own workshops for primary school students early on and gained experience through projects such as Solve for Tomorrow, Art of Hosting, and the creation of a youth magazine. Today, she contributes her creativity and organisational skills to projects such as the Rebellinnen-Kalender and school initiatives, while also engaging deeply with veganism and animal suffering.



### Emilie Alge
**16, Vorarlberg, Austria**

Emilie has been involved with the W*Ort association for many years, working to foster a strong sense of community and promote sustainable projects in her municipality. She organised cooking workshops for children and a children's clothing swap, which remains part of Lustenau's large clothing exchange to this day. As a children's representative on the board, she also advocates for giving children and young people a stronger voice.

### Alena Petric
**21, Vienna, Austria**



Alena is committed to creating greater equal opportunities for girls and women in technical fields. A key part of her engagement is co-founding ALISMA, an organisation for female HTL students in Vienna that creates a safe space through regular, accessible networking events, fostering exchange and empowering young women pursuing technical education and careers. She is also involved in youth advisory boards, education and climate initiatives, working to make STEM education more accessible and a more natural choice for girls.

# GENeration Changemaker
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### Rita Fussenegger
**24, Vienna, Austria**

Rita is committed to driving structural change in healthcare, particularly for people living with rare and undiagnosed conditions. Drawing on her own experiences, she founded several initiatives, including USE Verein and AufAtmenWG, to improve access to care, visibility, and support for those affected. Her work combines patient advocacy, innovative healthcare projects and direct support for seriously ill people and their families. She recently as well started to focus on project Development in Mental Health to highlight suicide prevention in physically chronically ill patients.

### Leander Klinger
**20, Lower Austria, Austria**



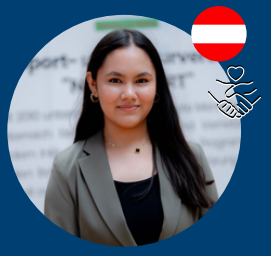
Leander is a Senior Software Developer in Vienna and Secretary General of this paper's functionary council. At 18 he co-founded the Austrian Excellence Society, raising over EUR 10,000 in its first year for high-potential technical students - funding five international competition wins and a scientific publication. He works where technology and European policy meet - the European Youth Parliament, Alpbach, the Warsaw Negotiation Round - convinced Europe should shape the AI revolution, not react to it.



### Ariadna Moldoveanu
**21, Vienna, Austria**

Ari is passionate about social change, women's rights, and youth entrepreneurship. Her school project "SheShield" focused on raising awareness about domestic violence and empowering young people. Through YEPA, she mentors and supports young people in developing their ideas and confidence. She also promotes FuckUp Nights and its message of taking risks, learning from mistakes, and never giving up. Across these communities, Ari is driven by the idea of opening doors for others, just as others once opened doors for her.

### Sediqa Saeedi
**17, Vienna, Austria**



Sediqa is committed to human rights and social cohesion through educational initiatives and her involvement in various organisations. Through her participation in public speaking competitions, she particularly encourages young people to raise their voices and become actively involved in society. She believes that meaningful change comes from knowledge, community, and standing together for freedom and human rights.



### Hannes Wimmer
**20, Vienna, Austria**

Hannes is committed to promoting fairer access to education and international opportunities. During his civilian service in the Philippines, he helped develop German language classes for female students, making educational pathways and scholarship programmes more accessible. Today, he contributes his experience to ELSA Vienna, raising awareness among young law students about social responsibility and proactive engagement.

### Berina Kulaš
**21, Vienna, Austria**



Berina is committed to translation, intercultural dialogue, and educational equity. Shaped by her own multilingual and multicultural upbringing, she strives to build bridges across languages and cultures to foster international collaboration. Alongside her studies in Transcultural Communication, she works as a German tutor and as a research assistant at the University of Vienna. There, she contributes to improving the Austrian school system for students with migrant backgrounds.

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*Every generation inherits problems it didn't create, but rarely gets a say in what comes next.*

*This Insight Paper changes that. Written by around thirty young changemakers from eight countries across Europe, it confronts six issues shaping the next decade: artificial intelligence and youth participation, gender equality, education reform, democratic participation, mental health, and migration and belonging. Through real stories, hard evidence, and country case studies from Germany to Switzerland, it exposes a single uncomfortable pattern, young people are consulted, but rarely heard where it counts.*

*This is not a paper asking for permission to speak. It is a claim young people are making on their own future, backed by research, testimony, and concrete policy proposals ready to be acted on. Read it not as an ending, but as a starting point, for whoever is ready to answer the question this generation keeps asking: not whether young people should be heard, but what they were actually able to change.*

ASHOKA