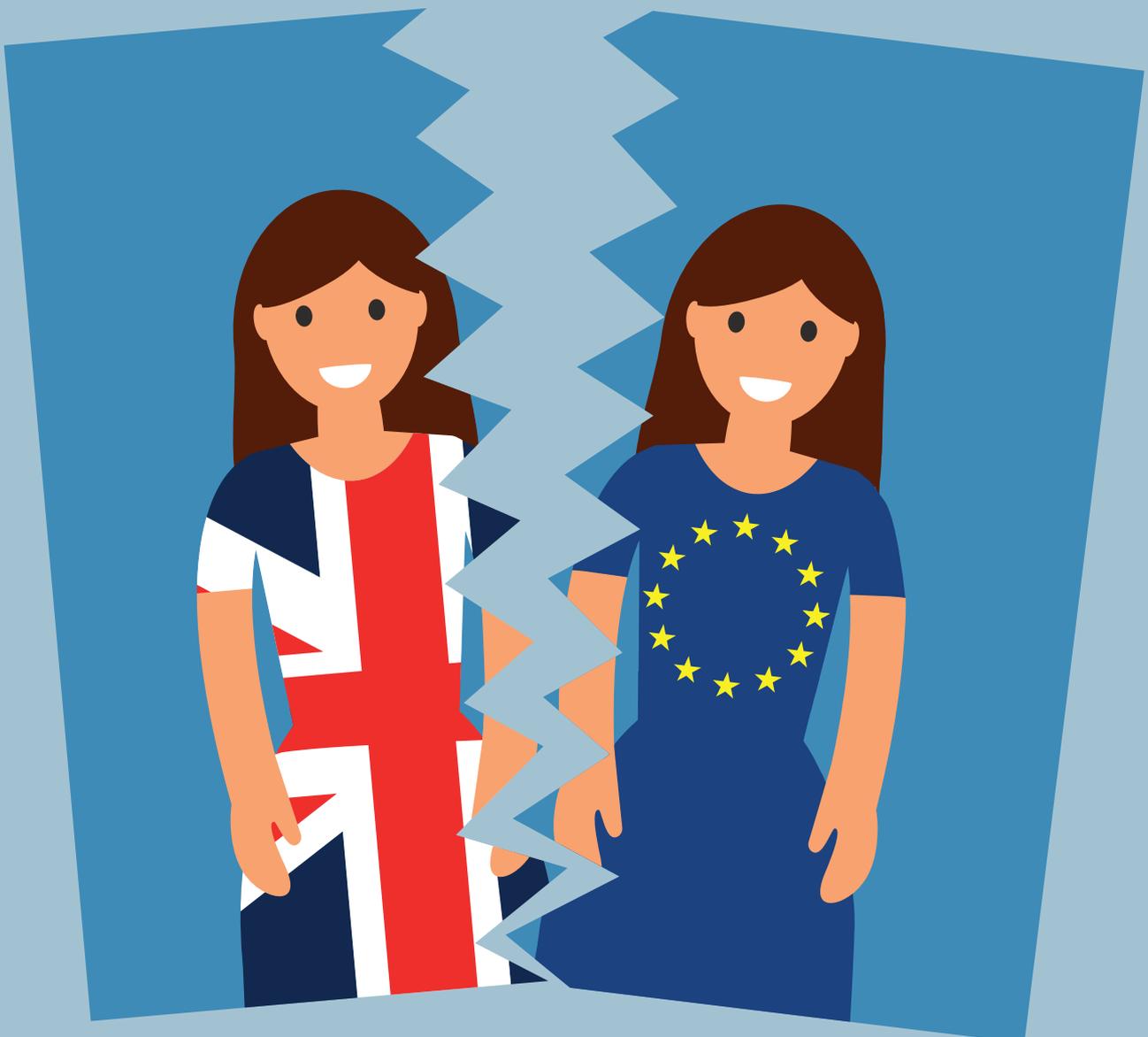


GENDERING BREXIT
the role and
concerns of feminists
and women's rights
organisations



Gendering Brexit: the role and concerns of feminists and women's rights organisations in the

UK

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Abstract

Brexit poses risks for the interactions between the different levels of institutional and civil society actors in the field of women's rights and welfare. This report shows that these dangers are occurring against the backdrop of a reduction of influence of women's organisations and attention paid to women's rights and equalities issues by the Conservative Government. In such a context, Brexit could place women's organisations in double jeopardy from a loss of funding and an increase in demand from dependents, with a knock-on effect on their capacity for political participation and advocacy when rights acquired under EU jurisdiction and further progress of gender equality could be challenged. Gender Five Plus believes that the legislative and political consequences of Brexit require a strong civil society sector to advocate on behalf of women, specifically minority and vulnerable women.

From a European perspective, the UK has often been a restrictive influence on progress in the social and employment field, including women's rights. However, the damage threatened by Brexit to the strong and productive relationship with British equality actors (institutional, academia and civil society) would be a loss to the EU wider European women's sector.

Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction	3
Methodology.....	3
A note on selection	4
Literature review.....	4
The shape of women’s rights organisations within the UK	7
Potential loss of Funding and its effects.....	7
The economic implications of Brexit.....	9
Women’s organisations and political participation	11
Participation at EU level.....	11
Participation at UK level.....	12
The implications of Brexit for research and infrastructure	14
The implications of Brexit for organisations and their stakeholders.....	15
Rights and equalities legislation	15
Future policies.....	16
The Brexit debate and nuance-poverty	17
Women’s organisations and the Brexit mechanism	17
The feminist community’s response to Brexit	19
Conclusions	20
References	22

Introduction

The side-lining of women's issues has been a continual issue in Brexit discourses, and there has been almost no initiative on the part of the main campaigners, spokespeople and negotiators to conduct a gender-impact analysis of Brexit. Furthermore, although it has been well documented that there was gender parity across the vote to leave the European Union, it is likely that women voted for different reasons than men. This report works towards redressing this imbalance, focussing specifically on the social, financial and structural implications of Brexit for feminist or women's organisations.

Methodology

The methodological approach combines interview data with prior scholarship to develop a structural analysis of the women's VSO and NGO sector in the UK, while researching individual approaches and attitudes to the prospect of Brexit. Interview data provided insights from members of some of the UK's biggest and most influential women's organisations, as well as from a smaller sample of minority or single-issue organisations. Interviews with academics focussed on illuminating the social context and possible policy ramifications of Brexit, as well as examining potential funding implications for the feminist academic community. This paper also draws heavily on (but does not always concur with) remarks made to the Women and Equalities Select Committee in their February 2016 report on Brexit.

This report is necessarily limited in the accuracy of its predictions due to the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the Brexit negotiations and the non-guaranteed status of funding and rights pledges made by the government. As such, participating organisations were often unable to comment specifically on potential effects. As Roberta Guerrina has commented, more work is needed on why organisations did not feel able to campaign or stake their positions before Brexit; this topic goes largely unaddressed in this report.

A note on selection

Gender 5+ invited many women's groups and politicians directly involved with women's rights and/or Brexit to take part in the research, including parties who had been both on the Remain and Leave sides of the debates. Very few politicians responded to our invitation and none were available for interview. We conducted interviews with the following representatives of organisations: Zarin Hainsworth and Barbara Cleary of the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO); Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivan of the Fawcett Society; Mary-Ann Stephenson of the UK Women's Budget Group; Nazmin Akthar of the UK Muslim Women's Network; Annette Lawson, formerly chair of both the Fawcett Society and NAWO; Frances Scott of the 50:50 Parliament campaign; and Baroness Glenys Thornton of the House of Lords (also of member of Agenda and CEO of the Young Foundation), as well as the following feminist academics: Dr Diane Elson, Professor Roberta Guerrina, Dr Rosie Campbell, and Dr Kate Maclean.

NGOs who were unable to contribute were more likely to be those who were smaller and had fewer financial or human resources. Of the women's organisations and charities we contacted, the Equality and Diversity Forum, Agenda, Women's Aid, the Women's Resource Centre and UN Women UK expressed support for the project but were unable to participate due to a lack of resources. Therefore our qualitative evidence issues predominantly from larger organisations which may not replicate the concerns of smaller organisations. We have supplemented this evidence via the consolidation of earlier quantitative research undertaken into the financial situations of women's charities in the UK.

Literature review

In the months since the Brexit referendum, much has been said and written about the reasons for and potential social impacts of the UK's departure from the EU. So much has been written that a comprehensive summary of the literature is impossible, so here we focus on the contributions of feminist academics relevant to this report.

A primary focus for feminist commentators has been the underrepresentation both of women and of gender equality issues in the referendum debates. A Loughborough University study

shows that across the entire 6-week campaign period, men took up 85% of press space, with 70% of television coverage attributed to four male conservative leaders and Nigel Farage (Haastrup, Wright & Guerrina, 2016). As Haastrup, Wright and Guerrina note, where women were consulted, their contributions ‘concentrated once again on which political institution is best placed to safeguard maternity rights, equal pay, and women’s human rights, thus implicitly equating women’s interest in the referendum with gender equality policies’ (Haastrup, Wright & Guerrina, 2016). By contrast, the dearth of women representing ‘high’ political issues such as immigration and the potential economic impact of Brexit undermines the reality that these too are gendered issues (Haastrup, Wright & Guerrina, 2016): as this report shall show, any post-Brexit failure of the economy is likely to have a disproportionate effect on women, especially immigrant, racial minority and working-class women.

Perhaps the largest and most diverse literature is dedicated to the liberal and feminist community’s response to Brexit. In particular, much has been made of the idea that the Brexit vote was an expression of frustration at a ‘liberal elite’, with 78% of Leave voters believing feminism to be ‘a force for ill’ (Ashcroft, 2016). In ‘Post-Truth and the Metropolitan Elite Feminist: Lessons from Brexit’, Ruth Cain examines Brexit as troubling the historical association of feminism and left-wing, pro-working class politics (Cain, 2016). The article provides a useful analysis of the shift in public perceptions whereby the upper-class, wealthy male becomes the ‘man of the people’ and the feminist is considered a member of an out-of-touch ‘liberal elite’. She highlights the need for responses which address the alienation of white working class women, suggesting that northern and rural working class women will be hardest hit by Brexit.

A general trend among bloggers and article writers has been to attribute the Brexit vote to displaced rage at the rising economic inequality in the UK. However, in ‘Gender and Global Trumpism’ Jacqui True seeks to remove the idea of the ‘forgotten white working class’ as the key agents of Brexit, instead blaming ‘racism’ which she sees as ‘the kernel of British identity’ (True, 2016). Taken together, Cain’s and True’s analyses illustrate the divergent instincts towards concern and condemnation which characterises liberal feminist academia’s response to Brexit.

A number of articles have attempted to rewrite the anti-democratisation narrative predominant during and since the referendum campaign. Fagan and Rubery provide a detailed history of the intersection of UK and EU equality legislation, examining the progress EU equality law has

imposed upon the UK's equality law, but also the limited impact of 'soft law' measures on the UK. They predict that Brexit 'will harm' the level of gender equality in the UK due to the UK's decoupling from the EU's progressive policy pathways and a 'greater insularity in UK policy' because of reduced exposure to the Open Method of Coordination (Fagan & Rubery, 2017). Additionally, they detail the UK's history of helping to stall progress on some EU gender equality initiatives (notably on the issue of maternity leave) and suggest that Brexit may help the progress of gender equality policy in the rest of the EU due to the departure of the UK. 'Far from being a pacesetter in this European arena, the UK has usually sought to stall, delete or divert legal measures' (Fagan & Rubery, 2017).

Robert Wintemute focusses specifically on the EU's history of support for LGBT rights, showing that the UK's anti-discrimination laws have consistently been prompted by EU law (Wintemute, 2017). Danisi, Dustin and Ferreira argue that EU directives have been 'instrumental in pushing ahead the LGBTIQ+ agenda in EU member states including the UK' (Danisi, Dustin & Ferreira, 2017). Though the UK has since gone beyond the requirements of EU law, it was the EU's Equality Framework Directive 2000/78 which sparked the directional shift in EU discrimination law benefitting the LGBT community. Their article also raises concerns for the loss of EU research resources, such as the progress funding programme and surveys and reports commissioned by the Fundamental Rights Agency (Danisi, Dustin & Ferreira, 2017).

Almost nothing has been written in the academic literature specifically addressing this report's focus, the prospects of women's rights organisations in Brexit Britain. Organisations have focussed on the legal rights and wellbeing of the demographics they represent, and stop short of assessing possible impacts to their own infrastructure or funding. In their assessment of the potential erosion of rights which leaving the EU may entail, charities are split on their perception of the UK as a leader in women's rights within the EU or as a reluctant beneficiary. Of common concern, however, are the so-called 'Henry VIII powers' which many believe could legitimate a quiet destruction of the anti-discrimination legislation enshrined in EU law. The protection of women's rights organisations is addressed briefly in the Women and Equalities Select Committee report on Brexit. Their recommendations include the provision of a platform for linking into civil society organisations. They also call for the provision of funds to replace research and other equality projects currently supported by the EU (Women and Equalities Select Committee, 2017).

The shape of women's rights organisations within the UK

Women's organisations within the UK are highly collaborative in nature, with almost all the organisations surveyed reporting frequent or long-term collaboration with multiple other charities or NGOs. This collaboration also frequently extends to charities whose aims are not explicitly feminist but whose area of work disproportionately affects women. Organisations collaborate on a range of projects including events, campaigns and reports, and also rely upon one another to provide expertise.

The advantages of working together are bifold. Firstly, contributors told us that it creates a sector with increased overall efficiency. Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivan describes the collaborative nature of the *FaceHerFuture* campaign (launched by Fawcett in response to Brexit) and other projects on VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) as being highly successful due to the wide pool of expertise offered by the smaller, single-issue or minority-representative groups with which the Fawcett Society was in collaboration¹. Collaboration between multiple organisations also enables a pooling of resources and political capital.

It is also evident that individual connections between group members and activists, both on a personal and professional level, exist over and above formal collaborations between groups. This interconnectedness stimulates collaboration and provides for a general awareness of other organisations' activities and expertise even without direct involvement.

Potential loss of Funding and its effects

This section will examine the impact of the economic climate and austerity measures on stakeholders in the women's charity sector as indirectly affecting the demand upon organisations, as well as direct funding implications of austerity upon organisations.

¹ #FaceHerFuture members include Agenda, Birthrights, BPAS (British Pregnancy Advisory Service), Centre for Gender Equal Media, Centre for Women and Democracy, Coventry Women's Voices, Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF), Fawcett Society, Fearless Futures, FiLia, Girlguiding UK, IKWRO, Latin American Women's Rights Service, Maternity Action, NAWO, Rights of Women, Southall Black Sisters, Tell MAMA, The Diana Award, Womankind, Women on Boards, Women's Aid Federation of England, Women's Budget Group, Women's Resource Centre and Working Families.

Women's organisations in the UK derive their funding broadly from state or EU funding, membership fees, and, to a lesser extent, private donations and grants, which are often sporadic, and made on a project-by-project basis. A 2018 survey found that these private funds are responsible for only 21% of funding for equalities and human rights organisations, with government (including EU grant) funding providing 32% of their sources, the second largest provider after individual donations (45%) (Equality and Diversity Forum, 2018). The Rosa Fund is the only charitable fund in the UK that exists solely to support initiatives benefitting women and girls.

Pressure on budgets is not unique to the women's sector. However, it is necessary to stress that women are more likely to suffer under welfare reform, austerity, and a challenging economic climate than men. Women have suffered disproportionately under the austerity measures and welfare reforms implemented by governments after 2010. It is estimated that of £82 billion in cumulative tax cuts and cuts in social security that will have been implemented by 2020, 81% of it will come out of women's incomes (Women's Budget Group, 2016).

Women's susceptibility to financial hardship under austerity stems from their pre-existing inequality. Women are twice as dependent on social security as men; for example, 95% of single parents dependent on income support are women (Engender, 2016). However, societal norms also play a part in rendering women less adaptive to extreme financial challenge. Women are twice as likely as men to give up paid work in order to care, and by the same token have reduced mobility and flexibility, often due to caring commitments (Engender, 2016). Furthermore, due to women's concentration in education, health, and the social services, they are disproportionately affected by public sector spending cuts (Seguino, 2009).

Participants and the actions of the Government itself combine to suggest that the problem lies not with an intent to disadvantage women, but with a general lack of receptivity to women's issues coupled with a refusal to acknowledge the salience of gendered lifestyle differences to economic decisions. For example, the Government did not employ gender mainstreaming on its austerity policies and successfully defeated a legal challenge from the Fawcett Society which would have compelled them to do so (Engender, 2016). It is essential to note that the Government is making important advances on certain issues such as the gender pay gap and VAWG. However, there are gaps in the current equalities strategy which would be addressed more effectively by an incorporated gender mainstreaming approach.

These failures have led to systemic financial discrimination against women which renders them under-supported and therefore more dependent upon the support of civil society. A 2016 report for the Women's Resource Centre found that 83% of women's sector organisations have experienced an increase in demand for their services in the last financial year. Of the organisations that reported higher demand, 39% drew a direct correlation between the government's austerity and welfare reform measures and the increased demand for women's services (Women's Resource Centre, 2016).

However, funding for women's charities is typically very low and they are predominantly under-staffed and under-resourced. Moreover, smaller and more financially precarious charities face more difficulty securing funding due to their lack of dedicated funding experts and the non-availability of funding specific to their area of focus. As Zarin Hainsworth noted, particular stipulations of funding programmes often force women's organisations to 'shift programmes and projects to fit in with what money is available'. When funding is cut, women's organisations prioritise frontline work and are more likely to make cuts in networking, campaigning and lobbying, and research (Women's Resource Centre, 2016). Reduced funding therefore silences women's groups politically – they continue to directly address issues at the cost of being able to speak out about them. Overall, it is clear that women's VCO funding is being slashed at a time when the demand for the services they provide is increasing.

The economic implications of Brexit

The economic implications of Brexit on women in the UK will have indirect ramifications upon the resources and objectives of the women's sector. As we have seen, women are overwhelmingly at greater financial risk than men in the event of a recession. Taken together, the potential loss of equality legislation and the almost certain factor of women's disproportionate financial disadvantage in the event of a recession will render women more dependent, directly or indirectly, on the services provided by women's organisations.

After Brexit, there is a risk that this will coincide with a reduction in funding for organisations. The susceptibility of women's and human rights organisations to financial instability depends heavily on the source of this funding, much of which is provided by the EU and distributed within the UK according to EU guidelines (Equality and Diversity Forum, 2018). The Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC) supports progress on many issues affecting women, including VAWG, discrimination and labour exploitation (Equality and Diversity

Forum, 2018). To date, the government has made no announcements on the future of this programme. Conversely, the government has said it *will* honour the funding commitments of ESIF (the EU Structural and Investment Funds Growth Programme) until 2020, as long as these commitments align with ‘domestic priorities’. ESIF is worth £500 million a year in England alone, and supports a range of equalities and human rights issues including women exploited in the sex industry, and welfare issues for LGBT+ people (Equality and Diversity Forum, 2018). However, no definition of ‘domestic priorities’ is forthcoming, and the EDF highlights concerns that the Shared Prosperity Fund will be targeted by geographical or business development criteria, which would lead to a loss of funding for many women’s organisations which are the current beneficiaries (Equality and Diversity Forum, 2018).

Equally, Glenys Thornton notes that some organisations rely on European contracts and collaborative projects with other European NGOs and social enterprises for a large portion of their income. While some larger charities we spoke to were not concerned about the funding implications of Brexit upon their organisation, the smaller ones raised concerns that current Brexit funding streams would not be replicated. It should be emphasised that this would have a knock-on effect on those charities receiving money from private funds. Both in the event of a recession and following the disappearance of other sources of funding, small charities will be forced to compete in ever greater numbers for independent grants.

Some representatives were insecure about the future ability of their organisation to attract substantial funding, concerned that they would be viewed as representing a minority social interest alongside increased competition from causes seen as more mainstream. As we have seen, the vast majority of women’s organisations are not in a position to withstand a prolonged period of reduced access to funds, with 94% having less than a year’s budget in reserve (Women’s Resource Centre, 2016).

Despite the government’s promise to replicate funding streams, there is ambiguity as to what this replication would constitute. Any replacement of EU funding with state funding would also render the schemes subject to alteration due to changing political priorities or an intensification of austerity measures.

Women's organisations and political participation

This section will examine the influences of the women's sector upon policy production in government and analyse the opportunities available for such involvement. Analysis of this section will borrow from Cullen's stipulation of the two factors shaping opportunities and constraints of women's groups in a political opportunity structure. These she outlines as a) the receptivity of government (in the case of her study, the EU itself) to salient issues; and b) the structural access a given group has to institutions (Cullen, 2014).

Participation at EU level

As Roberta Guerrina notes, 'traditionally marginalised groups have had a stronger advocacy at the international level' due to the existence and involvement in policy creation of the European Women's Lobby. Women's NGOs are represented at the European Women's Lobby by the UKJCW (UK Joint Committee on Women) which itself is an alliance of umbrella groups from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This provides a platform for representatives from the UK women's sector to participate at board and general assembly meetings, and at working groups surrounding specific topics. Barbara Cleary notes that 'the relationship with the European Women's Lobby is about bringing the countries in Europe together, and allowing them to share best practice, and work together on issues'.

In theory, membership (through umbrella groups) of the UKJCW also provides small and large organisations alike with an opportunity to consult upon and influence policy at EU level, with umbrella groups taking consultations back to member organisations for their perspectives, which are then relayed to the secretariat at the EWL. However, these processes are subject to time and funding issues, with smaller member organisations often lacking the funding to participate (Hainsworth). Nonetheless, the existence of an EU-sponsored platform for women's rights and equalities does create an infrastructure which guarantees diverse members' organisations a voice in policy formation at European level.

Participation at UK level

As we have seen, the current Conservative government has not been attentive to matters of gender equality. Though it was not a specific focus of questioning, most participants agreed with the view that there has been a general reduction in government amenability to listen and collaborate on gender-based issues. Annette Lawson and Thornton both note that post-2010 governments have moved away from practices of gender mainstreaming which were beginning to be integrated into policy production in the final years of the Labour government. This lack of gender mainstreaming and gender-based analysis, as the Engender and WBG reports show, has failed vulnerable women in the UK and in many cases increased demand upon charitable service providers.

Annette Lawson draws specific attention to the 2010 dissolution of the Women's National Commission (WNC), a non-departmental public body which provided a platform for representatives from women's organisations across the UK to consult on public policy and bring to the attention of government policy issues which are detrimental to women (Lawson). Lawson believes that the continued existence of the WNC would reduce the risk posed to women's rights by Brexit.

It is impossible to quantify the exact level of policy influence exerted by the WNC. It seems that NAWO has lacked the resources to fill the gap left by the WNC. However, Zarin Hainsworth stated that NAWO's positive working relationship with the GEO, and with some government departments and select committees, has meant that NAWO can still offer its members 'the ability to input into policy-making processes'. However, Lawson also measures the loss of the WNC in terms of a platform for collaboration and communication between women's charities and experts. Therefore, the effects of government inattention to women's issues can also be seen in damage to the infrastructure of the women's sector, which, as we have seen, relies highly upon collaboration and the sharing of expertise.

Currently, then, women's organisations within the UK lack the state-sponsored platform for collaboration and policy feedback that, however remotely, exists for them at EU level. Furthermore, the absorption of the WNC's functions into the Gender Equalities Office (within the Home Office) deprives policy makers of access to *independent* women's sector experts. A proposal composed by NAWO and the WRC upon the dissolution of the WNC draws attention to the continued need for a coordinating hub or consortium 'which is able to bring together

different strands for a collective voice by issues and particular groups of women' (National Alliance of Women's Organisations & Women's Resource Centre, 2010).

This does not mean that equalities issues are being wholly neglected within the UK political establishment. Strong relationships between female parliamentarians across the Commons ensure that ministers advocating for these issues are well-supported, and creates a network which grants more access to bills and augments the possibility of amending them. This also provides a resource network for women's organisations.

Among organisations, there is a hierarchy of recourse to influence upon governmental policy. Though few of our contributors were explicit about this, the impression is that the government's receptiveness to their agenda is broadly dependent upon the charity's having contacts within Parliament, as well as the size and prestige of the charity itself. However, larger organisations like Fawcett make a specific effort to include organisations with a 'smaller capacity' within campaigns (Tucker O'Sullivan). By pooling their contacts within Parliament, women's organisations are able to lobby more effectively for change.

Overall, women's organisations have multiple options for influencing policy in Parliament, and have shown that they are able to exploit these effectively. However, the current system is one which places the onus upon the women's charities rather than the government, which is especially problematic in the context of budget cuts which have been shown to disproportionately impact organisations' capacity for networking and policy engagement.

Furthermore, the lack of a state-sponsored, centralised platform for engagement with women's organisations and experts on women's rights means that organisations like NAWO and Fawcett have to target individuals and specific departments, and undermines the possibility of developing a more universal and integrated strategy for gender equality within government policy. Despite the imperfections of the EU model, it still represents a significant improvement upon the UK in this respect. G5 believes that the lack of a permanent government-sanctioned infrastructure providing women's sector organisations and experts with access to policy surrounding Brexit represents a serious democratic issue which will result in under-attention to women's issues in both legal and economic realms.

The implications of Brexit for research and infrastructure

Many participants expressed concern for the representation of Britain as a continued participant of EU discussions on women's rights. As we have seen, the EU has acted as a hub for centralised research and policy development in the area of equalities and women's rights, as well as providing research funding and collaboration opportunities for independent women's organisations in the UK.

However, Thornton also points out that Brexit will not negate the wealth of expertise in the women's and human rights sector in the UK and she is confident that European organisations will continue to work with the British sector post-Brexit. She suggests instead that 'bilateral [research] relationships will evolve [which will] bypass the British government'. This would lead to the government being further removed from up-to-date information on equalities and women's rights research.

A few participants separately raised the same areas in which they feel continued collaboration is vital: most importantly, the sharing of research and policy breakthroughs into VAWG, and the sharing of criminal information related to sex offenders or perpetrators of violence against women. Annette Lawson views continued membership of the European Women's Lobby as important to maintaining a structural relationship with other women's rights organisations in Europe. There is currently uncertainty over whether or not UK women's groups will continue to have a representative on the board of the European Women's Lobby. However, given the EWL's success in incorporating representatives from candidate member states, it is possible that the UK will be able to be represented.

Broadly speaking, the loss of access to shared knowledge, both in terms of policy and feminist academia, was of concern to many of our participants. Roberta Guerrina suggests that the potential for Britain to continue in international conversations about women's rights depends on organisations like the European Women's Lobby. The loss of access to structures such as the EWL will be a retrograde step resulting in reduced access to policy influence, with these groups will go back to being largely marginal or dependent on access to individual MPs who strongly support their cause.

However, there are obvious limitations to this model. If women's groups' representation in policy- or law-making discussions is dependent upon the support of a few individuals, there is

the problem of ‘how much longevity these agendas might have’ (Guerrina). An additional problem for the women’s sector is that their proponents may be members of parties which do not have direct recourse to government. The existence of an (informal) women’s network built around the Women’s Equality Committee, which links MPs concerned with women’s issues regardless of party background, is a reassuring mitigating factor in this. However, this means that women’s organisations’ and experts’ access to policy making *on their terms* is never guaranteed.

The implications of Brexit for organisations and their stakeholders

Though this report seeks to focus on the implications of Brexit for the feminist and women’s networks within the UK, it must also be observed that these networks are affected both by the changing circumstances of those to whom they offer support and representation, as well as by their context within the women’s rights movement in Europe as a whole. Moreover, as almost everyone surveyed noted, it is virtually impossible to second-guess the overall impact of leaving the EU at a time when Brexit still simply ‘means Brexit’. Therefore this section shall examine the widespread social and economic potential consequences of Brexit, before discussing the ways in which women’s organisations are attempting to draw attention to the risks.

Rights and equalities legislation

Brexit may lead to what Tucker O’Sullivan calls a ‘loss of legal backstop’ which would formerly have guarded against the repeal of essential anti-discrimination legislation. Participants exhibited varying levels of pessimism about the likelihood of damage to human rights and equalities legislation in the aftermath of Brexit. Many felt that the government’s guarantee that the legislation would be left exactly replicated in UK law was not convincing, and desired a written guarantee in the Bill itself (Fawcett Society, 2017).

Participants’ concern that Brexit could lead to a rolling-back of valuable human rights and employment legislation focusses around the so-called ‘Henry VIII’ powers enabled by Clause 9 of the European Union Withdrawal Bill, which enables primary legislation transposed into UK law after Brexit to be amended or repealed by subordinate legislation without further parliamentary scrutiny (UK Parliament). However, as the Report on Brexit from the Women

and Equalities Committee points out, no attempt is made to define ‘functionality’ within the clause, which has led to a legitimate concern that the term could be appropriated for ideological rather than practical means (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). Other specific concerns include the removal of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which, since it has never been incorporated into UK law, will have no direct effect in the UK after Brexit (NAWO, 2018).

Many contributors stated that the concern here is rooted in the political and economic context of Brexit. Almost all contributors described the post-2010 coalition and Conservative governments in terms of regression from the gender-related efforts of the previous Labour government. The onus of equalities legislation has moved back to competitiveness and away from individual rights. Cordelia Tucker O’Sullivan elucidates the issue: ‘equality legislation and regulations have been accused of being ‘red tape’ and barriers to small businesses employing people’. Roberta Guerrina speculates that any challenge to the Equality Act 2010 would not present itself in the form of principle, but by attempt to reverse some of the qualifying or ‘soft policy’ measures of the Act.

A factor which may add pressure to this risk will be the requirement to forge trade deals with other countries. Mary-Ann Stephenson notes that international trade agreements often include negotiating on health and safety standards and workers’ rights, and warns that the UK will experience a far greater loss of control over its ability to accept trade and worker terms than as part of the EU. Furthermore, Guerrina notes that, if the economic assessments of Brexit are correct, an economic downturn will lead to the concentration of efforts into safeguarding businesses, as well as an agenda to maximise competition within a globalised economy.

Future policies

Another question to consider is what policies the UK may miss out on in the future after a withdrawal from the EU. As Tucker O’Sullivan notes, the UK will almost certainly exit the EU before the implementation of the Work-Life Balance legislative proposals, which provides for a large set of measures including paid parental leave for both parents. Gender 5+ considers this to be a major loss to the rights of parents and carers. In addition to this, the UK would certainly lose its obligation to comply with outstanding transformative directives from the EU.

The Brexit debate and nuance-poverty

Several participants speculated that the resurgence of widespread social economic issues in the event of a recession will force organisations to move away from lobbying on key minority issues upon which they had previously been able to focus. Nazmin Akthar gives the example of the UK Muslim Women's Network's campaign to amend the Foreign Marriages Act to better facilitate access to a civil and Islamic divorce for the female party. As an extremely minority issue, notwithstanding its detrimental effect on many Muslim women in the UK, Akthar concedes that it may be low priority both in terms of candidacy for funding and as a political issue. The idea that Brexit has and may still lead to forms of what we will call nuance-poverty within organisations, as well as public debate of the issues they represent, was raised several times and in various forms throughout the research.

Women's organisations and the Brexit mechanism

The manner which Brexit negotiations are being conducted poses serious obstacles for the representation of women and the engagement of women's charities. However, this is symptomatic of a long-term exclusion of women from the Brexit debate. A Loughborough University study found that men took up 85% of press space across the entire 6-week campaign period (Haastrup, Wright & Guerrina, 2016). Where women were consulted, it was on the 'low' politics of domestic affairs, with little attempt made to elucidate the fact that issues of 'high' politics, such as the economy, impact women differently to men. As Mary-Ann Stephenson notes, there is a crucial difference between discussing women's employment rights and the impact of the economy *upon women*.

Participants were in universal agreement that campaigners on both sides of the referendum debate delivered an insufficient and non-nuanced argument surrounding women's rights and equality issues. Nazmin Akthar suggests that a particular failure was the lack of recognition that the discussion of women's interests cannot be condensed to assume a single 'type' of woman, and notes that almost no attention was paid to the differing needs of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) or religious minority, and specifically Muslim, women. She comments that 'women were being used as a token' and notes that most conversations about Muslim representation regarding Brexit are being held with Muslim men.

Similarly, women are severely underrepresented at the Brexit negotiating table. Apart from the Prime Minister, there are two senior women in the Brexit department, and 3 of 10 in the EU negotiation team. This is especially concerning given that there was not a dearth of talented female MPs who campaigned for Leave. Many of our participants expressed frustration at this lack of female representation; Tucker O'Sullivan points out that the negotiating panel would have been subject to approval and as such indicates that the gender imbalance must have been considered acceptable. Given women's low representation on the negotiating team, it is highly unlikely that women's issues will have been the subject of meaningful discussion during the negotiations.

Guerrina adds the caveat that, if the final deal reached is a 'hard' (or, indeed, a 'no deal') Brexit, the discussion of social policy negotiations with the EU is irrelevant. However, women's rights need still to be addressed on points of continued collaboration with the EU. Tucker O'Sullivan gives the example that the 2017 government white paper on issues of terror and security gave no mention to gendered issues such as FGM (female genital mutilation), human trafficking, European Protection Orders or more general issues of VAWG or data sharing on known sex offenders. Tucker O'Sullivan describes this as an 'oversight tied to [the] representation problem'.

Throughout the interviews, we found no evidence that the Department for Brexit had consulted with any of the women's organisations on the issue of Brexit, despite many of them having prominent reputations within Parliament as equalities and women's rights experts. Since the interview, the Fawcett Society told us that they have had some contact with DexEU. However, due to the nature of the negotiations it is impossible to estimate if and how equalities issues are being taken into serious consideration.

Overall, negotiations have so far been conducted in a way that is not conducive to women's representation or participation. This has led to a fair suspicion among prominent women's organisations that issues pertaining to women and equalities either occupy a very low priority position within the negotiations or are simply not being taken into account at all. As the previous section showed, Brexit need not be detrimental to women's rights and equalities protection within the UK. However, currently there is very little evidence that the post-Brexit trajectory of women's and minority rights will be a positive one, and there is a clear need for greater female representation as well as the involvement of women's rights and equalities experts.

The feminist community's response to Brexit

While most of the academics and organisation representatives we spoke to outlined their opposition to the idea of leaving the EU and their belief that the impacts on women would be predominantly negative, they are also attempting to work constructively to prevent this outcome.

In terms of direct governmental or parliamentary engagement, the output has been limited to a few high-profile organisations, and has been focussed on the preservation of legal rights (specifically anti-discrimination laws). The Fawcett Society, working with the *FaceHerFuture* coalition, has lobbied MPs to bring in amendments to define the so-called 'Henry VIII' clauses. In addition, in a briefing circulated to the House of Lords, NAWO are lobbying for 'policy intentions' (i.e. government promises to uphold existing funding streams and equalities legislation) to translate into 'legislative commitments'. NAWO have also demanded for 'a clause [to be] included in the Bill to clarify when and how the courts can take into consideration developments in EU law [after Brexit] and a commitment that UK employment law will keep pace with [EU] social and employment policy' (NAWO, 2018).

Many women's organisations are participating in the debate by dedicating space in reports and on websites to an ongoing analysis of the Brexit negotiation developments and their prospective impacts on women. For example, the website of the Equality and Diversity Forum hosts a 'Brexit Resource Centre' with updates and commentary upon the progress of bills. However, and while there is no way to quantify the success of these efforts, women's organisations lack the resources to publicise their commentary, and there has been very little take-up from the media on the issue.

A further obstacle to the representation of women's issues is the speed with which Brexit talks are taking place. The high turnover of negotiation developments is a serious challenge for women's organisations, which are faced with a lack of resources to deal comprehensively and holistically with updates. Furthermore, the lack of transparency within the negotiations has meant that much campaigning pressure has necessarily been applied speculatively, with campaigners having little or no idea of what they are trying to influence.

Conclusions

We find that the main threat to women in the UK is not inherent in the legal nature of the Brexit process, but lies in its politico-ideological context. While there is no inherent anti-feminist or anti-woman instinct at work in the Brexit process, the cumulative impact of a tendency towards deregulation, a probable economic downturn and a lack of sufficient financial support both for vulnerable women and the organisations which support and represent them is likely to make Brexit overall a negative prospect for women. The government's lack of attention to gender mainstreaming in recent economic policy has already seriously disadvantaged women, and a similar lack of attention to the issue is expected after Brexit.

Furthermore, though there is nothing to prevent the UK's separate adoption of progressive models of work-life balance and other forthcoming equality initiatives from the EU, the ideological trajectory of the current government suggests that these would not be adopted in the wake of Brexit. The concerns raised relating to the 'Henry VIII powers' have not yet been adequately assuaged by the government and a guarantee that these provisions will not be used to strip down equalities legislation has not been forthcoming. This issue is especially salient due to the increased exposure to deregulating pressures that threatens to prevail in the wake of Brexit.

We find that the women most likely to be negatively affected by Brexit are the most disadvantaged in society. After Brexit, the much-touted need to re-establish trade currents within a global market will shift the onus even further away from guaranteeing equalities and towards deregulation. This will lead to job precarity for the most vulnerable women in the jobs market. While papers have made the argument for businesses to promote equality on the basis of financial gain, Gender 5+ considers that legislating against discrimination has inherent value in the protection of vulnerable individuals rather than economic incentives. Potential recession in the aftermath of Brexit would also place disproportionate strain upon women, especially considering the highly gendered implications of the Universal Credit system and austerity measures.

While they do not lack the volition to respond to these challenges, the women's sector is not best placed to respond to Brexit due to constraining factors beyond its control. Structurally, organisations make good use of individual expertise and political influence is spread effectively within certain alliances. However, and despite the democratic aims of those involved, a system

in which smaller or single-issue organisations can only access representation through the patronage of large or umbrella organisations establishes an automatic hierarchy which runs the risk of diluting or side-lining minority objectives. This speaks to the lack of a democratic and state-sponsored policy platform which used to exist in the form of the WNC.

Moreover, the challenge to women's organisations existing either to represent vulnerable demographics or to offer them practical support is compounded by ongoing funding challenges which themselves threaten to intensify after Brexit. These organisations' prioritisation of front-line services means that the funding challenges place specific strain upon their ability to present issues to Parliament and government, and the lack of a platform for policy engagement within government for women's organisations continues to diminish their capacity to draw attention to these structural issues.

In order to address the shortfall in resources and political influence currently affecting the women's sector, more investment is needed directly into women's organisations, but also into the creation of an infrastructure which will render consultation on policy issues more streamlined, more democratic and ultimately more cost-efficient. Only a stronger women's civil society sector could ensure that Brexit would not pose significant threats to the welfare of vulnerable women in the UK.

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