

Does Brexit have a Gender?

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We've read the headlines, we've seen the news and we're all well aware of Theresa May's latest speech calling on the European Union to outline what they want, following the rejection of her Chequers plan last week. It seems there's continual commentary on what our Prime Minister is doing (and when it goes spectacularly wrong of course)! But what we never really consider, is her place as a woman leading a predominantly male front bench to the political frontline.

Last week I attended a conference that did just that. The [Brexit & Gender Conference](#) held by The UK in a Changing Europe initiative, considered the idea of 'gendering Brexit'. Yes I hear you groan, fancy there being an event to consider the role of gender in the Brexit process and the implications thereafter. I have to admit, when I first signed up, I wasn't completely sold on the idea either. I did however enter into this with an open mind ready to be convinced if you really could 'gender' Brexit.

First off, I'd like to consider the evidence against this theory. According to the fantastic work of Dr Roberta Guerrina, who commenced her research just days after the referendum, there was no gender gap in the vote [1]. Dr Charlotte Galpin's work found that women were referenced in news coverage in terms of historical figures like Margaret Thatcher, but not much [2]. There is also an argument that if benefits are cut following Brexit, such as Child Benefit, that women will suffer as a result of this- but I'd argue that many single fathers may also claim for this and be hit too [3].

However, the work of these same academics also found that the reasons for women appearing less in news coverage may be that they feel less confident in their knowledge. In fact, only one in five articles during the Brexit vote period was written by a woman [2]. Julian Jessop, from the Institute of Economic Affairs, who are a pro-Brexit and free market lobby group, highlighted the co-dependence of Child Benefit and that Economists would have supported the raising of women's retirement age. He did however acknowledge that on a more general work based scale, women find it difficult to move between sectors due to gaps in employment through childcare responsibilities. He acknowledged this as something which must be addressed regardless of Brexit [4].

The most interesting research presentation for me, was that of Dr Lisa McKenzie, who discussed her work as an Ethnographer between 2013 and 2017 on a project she was working on in Bethnal Green. As her research method dictates, she embedded herself in the environment of those she studied and sought to understand their knowledge and beliefs. Although her project was not related to Brexit, she noticed a change in attitudes

towards politics when the referendum was called. Local council elections and the general election of 2015 had not interested these women, believing politics to be ‘something that didn’t affect them’. The referendum was different, suddenly they were discussing politics in the local café and many registered to vote for the first time in their lives! Suddenly they were important and they were empowered to go out and exercise their democratic right. These women wanted to be represented on the political stage [5]. However, this could equally be seen as a point on class representation in the referendum and not gender specifically.

I’d argue that although I don’t agree that Brexit in isolation can be ‘gendered’ as such, I do agree that in terms of the political representation of women called on as experts in news coverage and as journalists writing on these issues, that there isn’t enough. Yes we have the Laura Kuenssbergs of this world, but other than that, there seems to be very little representation of women. For me, Brexit isn’t gendered, but there’s still a lot more work to do in terms of promoting the work of women on the political and journalistic stage.

End Notes

1. Guerrina, R. (2018), The UK in a Changing Europe, *Gender in the Brexit Debate – Brexit & Gender Conference*, London, 20th September 2018
2. Galpin, C. (2018), The UK in a Changing Europe, *Gender in the Brexit Debate – Brexit & Gender Conference*, London, 20th September 2018
3. Walker, S. (2018), The UK in a Changing Europe, *Gender in the Brexit Debate – Brexit & Gender Conference*, London, 20th September 2018
4. Jessop, J. (2018), The UK in a Changing Europe, *Gender, the economy and Brexit – Brexit & Gender Conference*, London, 20th September 2018
5. McKenzie, L. (2018), *Space, place and diverse experiences of Brexit – Brexit & Gender Conference*, London, 20th September 2018.