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Haastrup, Toni, Wright, Katharine and Guerrina, Roberta (2019) *Brexit: gendered implications for equality in the UK*. European Journal of Politics and Gender . ISSN 2515-1088.

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Brexit: Gendered implications for equality in the UK

How can we seek to unpack the complex and gendered dynamics of Brexit amidst a deeply divisive and fast paced debate? We argue that to not address this question is a cost too high. The challenge, given the scope of our intervention here is to disentangle the work that gender is doing as a structure of power that shapes every aspect of our daily lives. As feminist scholars we know that gender structures and norms will permeate the myriad possibilities for what Brexit might look like. Therefore, we take as our starting point the nature of the process itself, both pre and post Referendum to consider whose voices and what issues have been prioritised. This, we argue is our best opportunity to consider what the final settlement is likely to look like and how it might shape gender regimes in the UK in future. We also consider current government responses to crisis, in particular austerity, its impact on gender equality, arguing that if austerity has been gender blind, Brexit will be too.

Feminist analysis of the UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit) has highlighted the deeply gendered nature of current debates and the process of leaving. This process has been reflective of the continued marginalisation of women as political participants and especially as experts and commentators during the referendum campaign in 2016. Moreover, we now know that the political commitment to women's human rights protection in the UK is jeopardized by this process. This is part of a broader pattern of women's marginalisation from political spaces including in academic debates. In addition to excluding women's voices and experiences, the process of Brexit in the UK has also been deeply racialized, through the exclusion and exclusionary framing of ethnic minorities and classed in its framing of the so-called white working class.

A feminist intersectional understanding, that situates the interaction of gender, race, and class in political processes, is thus necessary to fully grasp the broader implications of Brexit for equality (and representation) in the UK. To not do so is morally problematic, hindering our understanding of Brexit and undermining efforts to address persistent inequalities. Moreover, it provides a different kind of insight to dominant explanations of Brexit particularly those that focus on disaffection grounded in the adverse impacts of globalisation. This analysis, however, concentrates on the economic and social grievances of one particular group: white, working class, men.

The prevailing evidence, however, suggests that Brexit will disproportionately and negatively impact marginalised groups (in terms of gender, race, sexuality and class. On women's reproductive rights for example, scholars have shown that there is a likelihood that production is more valued than reproduction to the detriment of women and benefit of business interests dominated by men. Overall then, the process is likely to trample on fundamental principles like equality. Understanding the opportunities offered by EU membership to consolidate equal rights policies, and the impact of withdrawing this safety net is an important point that has largely been overlooked by most analyses. As we saw during the 2008 financial crisis, commentators assume that the experience of crisis is ubiquitous and have disregarded evidence that women have borne the largest share of the costs of the crisis.

Additionally, women's advocacy groups will also lose access to powerful allies within European institutions who usually hold member states to account. A similar picture rings true for LGBTIQ+ groups, who will lose further recourse to justice currently granted by European

courts. They will also lose access to critical EU funding and the inter-European networks it has enabled. Already, the rise in racialised hate crimes since the Brexit vote has been well documented. Even more troubling is the fact that the main targets of many of these crimes are visibly identifiable Muslim women.

As the voice of traditionally marginalised groups and perspectives continue to be silenced, Brexit in its design, and as is currently being enacted, is poised to reproduce vulnerabilities based on race, class and gender. We further argue that the silences in the current debates and processes of Brexit are to the detriment of a future and ethical post-EU Global Britain.

Following the publication of the UN report on poverty in the UK, the UN Special Rapporteur was sharp in his condemnation of government policies, which also provides context for the implementation of Brexit. At a press conference, the rapporteur noted: 'If you got a group of misogynists in a room and said how can we make this system work for men and not for women they would not have come up with too many ideas that are not already in place'. Indeed, if the main lesson of austerity and 'crisis' has been to reinforce the government's business centred approach at the expense of gender equality commitments, then a new 'crisis' resulting from Brexit will likely follow a similar course. A convincing consensus is thus starting to emerge that Brexit, as currently envisaged, is unlikely to challenge this path if the voices and experiences especially those already on the margins remain silenced within the declared policy priorities of Brexit.