



GENDER AND BREXIT, London EP office 22nd March 2018

Summary of proceedings

While the EU and UK government are finding it hard to see eye to eye, women from Europe and the UK are exploring the possible impact of Brexit and finding common grounds on how to mitigate its effects. At a meeting in London on the 22nd of March, Gender5plus, a European feminist think tank, brought together UK women and women's organisations, trade unions and academics to take a hard look at the ongoing negotiations around Brexit and what it would mean for women and their existing rights and their future in general.

The meeting, which was hosted by the London office of the European Parliament, brought together more than 80 participants and culminated in a lively debate and concrete proposals on what women would like to see as an outcome of Brexit.

The panel discussion, which included presentations Gloria Mills from Unison, Mary Honeyball, MEP, Jill Rubbery from Manchester University, Roberta Guerrina from the University of Surrey and Alice Chilcott, gender scholar and author of the report on the effects of Brexit on women's organisations.

Members of the Panel shared the analysis that gender did not play a role in the Brexit negotiations. As Gloria Mills put it "gender has been clearly off the agenda, and gender equality as an issue of concern has not been part of the UK agenda since the 2008 and the economic crisis." She underlined that it was disturbing that no gender analysis or assessment with regards to gender within the Brexit negotiations has taken place. She called on all relevant stakeholders and actors such as women organisations and trade unions to work together to assure protection of women's rights. "The UK shouldn't leave the EU without assuring that the current standards with regards to gender equality are not in danger in the post-Brexit scenario." Alice CHILCOTT, Gender Expert, presented the report "Gendering Brexit: the role and concerns of feminists and women's rights organisations in the UK" which had been commissioned by G5+ for the purposes of the meeting. Her research which included interviews with many women's organisations and women decision-makers, came to the conclusions that Brexit had the potential to seriously undermine the participation of women's NGOs in the policy processes as well as in service delivery. She also pointed out that there was a strong demand for a state sponsored independent national platform for women's organisations – a new Women's National Commission.

Prof. Jill RUBERY, University of Manchester, underlined the need to take a good look at how far gender equality policy in the UK has developed due to pressure by the EU. "Looking back, we see that the UK has been called to act by the EU on several issues concerning especially women, such as maternity leave. The fact that the EU has repeatedly talked about some gender equality issues has affected the actions taken at the national level, including the UK. It is not a coincidence that many of those topics raised by the EU are afterwards in the UK agenda." But she did not stop there and advocated for even more and called for a radical campaign to improve gender equality in the UK.

Prof. Roberta GUERRINA, University of Surrey, added yet another dimension to the discussion. "Researching EU referendum campaign communications, we found that the leave campaign was 5x more present online than the remain campaign. We also found that only 1,9% of the quotes were about any issue related to women or to gender equality in the leave campaign, and 6% in the remain campaign. This means that gender equality was not an important issue.



She added that the typical excuse was that we needed to concentrate on the” key issues”. but what are those? There is a clear bias on what the “priority issues” are and gender issues are certainly not considered ‘High Politics’.”

Finally, Mary HONEYBALL, MEP, was very clear in saying that for her, the Brexit deal is not over yet. “So many UK citizens are not happy about it. Even many of the leave voters have expressed their disappointment on how the Brexit process has developed. The whole Brexit process is ideologically driven.” She outlined the UK parliament’s hostility women’s rights and underscored the European Parliaments role in ensuring women’s rights. As an example she referred to the European regulation against human trafficking which the UK afterwards incorporated.

In the discussion that followed, participants raised a host of issues and concerns ranging from the lack of gender analysis as to the impact of Brexit, the lack of understanding or the unwillingness by the main media to inform the general public about the benefits that women and citizens in general derived from EU membership. Participants agreed that it was difficult to pass the message and has been in the preparation of the referendum. A good number of participants were greatly concerned about the possibility of an economic downturn after Brexit and the spectre that women once again – much like during the economic crisis of 2008 – would be heavily affected. Anita Pollack, former MEP, raised the issue of the “Irish question” and that it should not be forgotten that women took a big part on the peace movement.

The many concerns which were raised were matched by concrete proposals from both participants and panel. Gloria Mills advocated to “turn the Brexit anxiety into action”, that women needed to be seen demanding. Likewise, Mary Honeyball, underlined the “incredible job” that women have done. Roberta Guerrina talked about ownership and the need to fight for wider employment rights while Jill Rubbery proposed a radical campaign with a wider focus which included work-life balance, fair pay or a living wage.

The meeting closed on a high note and with an understanding that women’s mobilisation on and around Brexit was far from over.

Summary of the main proposals:

1. Women will be negatively affected by Brexit
2. Need to politicize the Brexit agenda; need to bring in a gender assessment and shape negotiations accordingly. Make gender ‘high politics’ in the Brexit negotiations and beyond.
3. Launch a radical campaign to improve gender equality in the UK,
4. Forge strong alliances across sectors, unions, civil servants, charities and NGOs around Brexit and gender
5. Start an information campaign – in simple terms and as concrete as possible about the equality and anti-discrimination policies of the EU.
6. Consider that Brexit is a political process and may not be a done deal yet.
7. Forge strong links with supportive EU structures such as the European Women’s Lobby and organisations and think tanks like Gender5plus.