

Feminist Activists on Brexit

Endorsements

Too many of our voices as women, and indeed women of colour, were not heard in the EU referendum campaign and its aftermath. Thank goodness then for this book as it goes some way to redress this. Whilst on occasion painful to read for those of us on the losing side, it also offered warmth, optimism and inspiration. A real roller coaster of emotions revisiting the highs and lows of the period through the collection of writers who generously shared their stories, often intimately and uniquely. I came away with optimism in the power of women, the importance of standing together, united by our commonalities and taking comfort in our diversity. Crucial reading not just for those of us still left reeling and bruised by Brexit, or those interested in a feminist perspective of a significant historical event, but also more widely: if we keep sidelining the impact of political decisions on women, we can hardly be surprised when the political solutions of those in power fail to deliver for so many of us.

Leandra Box, Race Equality Foundation

A highly needed and very original contribution to our understanding of intersectional feminist, women's and migrant struggles against Brexit in the UK. *Feminist Activists on Brexit: From the Political to the Personal* scrutinizes how nationalist, radical conservative and right-wing populist forces have been othering women in private, family and community life, activism, labour market, and public sphere at large. It effectively contests those destructive forces and develops transformative visions of feminist political agenda, community organizing, and democracy. The book stands out because it integrates exceptionally well knowledge from researchers, activists, community organizers, and writers that rely on diverse approaches, from interviews, autobiographies to feminist theoretical analysis and poetry, written in a style made accessible to academics and wider public. I recommend this book to everyone, who wants to understand Brexit and its complexities.

Dr Kateřina Vrábliková, University of Bath

Feminist Activists on Brexit: From the Political to the Personal is unique in bringing together the experiences and reflections of feminist activists and academics to bear on the single most monumental constitutional change in contemporary British politics – Britain's departure from the European Union, or Brexit. With careful precision, the book interrogates the impact of Brexit on women's lives, and on feminist collective action. With passion, it explores the daily gendered, racialised and intersectional 'othering' of Brexit even as the negotiations in high political forums deploy a gender-neutral discourse. Through the lens of Brexit, and latterly Covid-19, this compelling book redefines for our times the 1970s feminist insight 'the personal is political'. *Feminist Activists* is a call to action, a roadmap for emancipatory politics. The book is an invitation to feminists and progressive networks to re-engage with democratic institutions, challenge misogynistic and

racist political cultures, and shape a genuinely inclusive, participatory democracy. *Feminist Activists* is quite simply an essential read for anyone who cares about democratic politics in Britain today.

Professor Yvonne Galligan, Technological University Dublin

Essential reading for scholars and activists – for everyone who cares about our leaving of Europe, this is a book about the agony and jeopardy of Brexit.

Resounding throughout this vivid and impressive collection of stories from across the four nations of the UK, it also forms an important record both of the significant, rich and diverse experiences of women's solidarity and of achievements over decades of the European project of equality and anti-discrimination.

Grassroots activists, academics, trade unionists and community leaders write with immediacy, urgency and gravitas as they describe – in one case in haiku – what women had and what will be lost to Brexit. These remarkable women continue to actively defend the rights of women, migrants and refugees throughout Europe, for example through the Single Parent Action Network, a social movement of 'rooted cosmopolitanism', linking the domestic with the international, the political and the personal, the Women's Budget Group and a raft of feminist and diversity networks and organisations.

The women are at once and severally, British, and yet no longer 'really' so, as sisters with origins as far as Somalia and as near as the Netherlands discovered in the new post-referendum hostile environment of racism and othering. Examples of the often toxic masculinity of Westminster politics, Brexit's threat to the Northern Ireland Peace Treaty, contradictions between the sometimes gender sidelining of Scottish nationalism and its promise for female emancipation, together with a rising backlash against equality and feminism in Wales give us important detailed insights into how it was in the EU and how it is today for women in all four corners of the United Kingdom.

Their book is an important record of remembrance of the successes of the European era and women's part in these, but also of the rage, sorrow and despair as a populist, nationalistic patriarchal Brexit erodes women's rights, tries to silence voices and dismantle women's solidarity and community.

And yet it is too a call to re-group, mobilise and fight on; even more so as 'the storm unleashed by Covid 19' is valorising women's roles as carers, health workers, in community and home informs the setting of new agendas to 'build back better'.

Dr Sue Ledwith, The Global Labour University

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Feminist Activists on Brexit: From the Political to the Personal

EDITED BY

SUE COHEN

University of Bristol, UK

AND

MARGARET PAGE

University of the West of England, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80043-421-9 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-420-2 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-422-6 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the feminist activists and colleagues who participated with us in EU funded partnerships and projects to promote women's intersectional equality. These experiences of working together, across differences of context and political stance, have inspired and made this book possible. In particular we thank The Flashmob in Bristol who encouraged us to write this book, and the friends and family members who supported us in this endeavour.

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Preface

Janet Newman, Emeritus Professor, Open University
j.e.newman@open.ac.uk

Writing and reading about Brexit tends to be a depressing experience. For those coming from a history of social activism and/or critical scholarship, the focus is almost exclusively on recounting what is lost. Brexit inculcates a climate of despair and pessimism. For those who have struggled for change, mounted protests, won some battles and transformed the very language of public life, we are now faced with a climate in which our actions are limited to defending small remnants of a more expansive politics. A range of voices have documented the dismantling of institutional and legal safeguards, the reversal of hard-won political achievements, the exacerbation of social divisions and the likely economic costs, especially for those in marginal or low paid work.

This book challenges the absence of women's voices in the Brexit debate, exploring the likely impact of Brexit not only on the laws and institutions that had enshrined some measure of equality but also on contemporary language and culture. In this way, the volume offers a critical vocabulary for understanding – and working against the grain of – the contemporary political culture of the UK and beyond. It shows how the sharing of activist experiences can itself be an act of resistance, forging solidarities across diverse political voices. This matters in a climate where feminist politics has been residualised and characterised as 'yesterday's agenda'. On the contrary, there is an urgent need to draw on feminist thinking to explore the many different ways in which Brexit affects women's lives.

Brexit marks an unfolding set of legislative changes that are eroding the rights of women, migrants and other groups, and undoing the institutions that inscribed the equality gains of the last half century. It is dismantling the regulatory frameworks that protect citizens from exploitation and other harms whether as workers, consumers or carers. Its impact on the economy is likely to be severe; the profound economic shock that follows will have harsh consequences for marginal and fractional workers, opening up opportunities for greater exploitation at the point at which safeguards are being dismantled. It is impoverishing whole neighbourhoods and regions as businesses close or decide to relocate. And the public sector and wider public domain are already being starved of resources as government pursues its project of shrinking the state and dismantling institutions.

Brexit has also heralded a profoundly gendered and racialised reconfiguration of the cultural landscape. At the same time that (some) women were brought to

voice by the #Me Too movement, climate change activism and other international struggles, so women were being silenced by the political culture that enabled, and is exacerbated by, Brexit. This double silencing is significant. High profile women (demonised as ‘Remoaners’) were assaulted, maligned, abused and, in the case of Jo Cox, murdered, by those working for Leave campaigns. This was a highly public form of silencing, engendering anger but sometimes leading to defensiveness and retreat as political commitments were weighed against personal risk. But Brexit also enables the silencing of women through the proliferation of domestic violence and homophobic and racist assaults in homes and on the street. These processes of silencing are not universal: the success of the Leave campaigns depended on the support of many women. But Brexit seems to have closed many of the spaces used by those seeking to work for progressive, transformational change. And it has delegitimised political discourses inspired by feminism.

To understand the ways in which these different dimensions of change are dynamically intertwined – and compound each other – it is helpful to re-engage with the feminist slogan that ‘the personal is political’. This phrase of the 1970s brought issues previously assumed to be a matter of private life – care, relationships, domestic violence – into the public domain, making them the focus of policymaking and political discourse. Over time, the phrase has also been used to engage with issues of identity and belonging. While sometimes tending towards processes of individualization, the understanding of the personal as political has brought matters of feeling and attachment into the political lexicon.

As this volume shows, Brexit has profound implications for questions of culture, identity and belonging. It erodes already fragile solidarities across differences of nationality, class, and generation. It undermines the notion that England, Scotland and Northern Ireland form a United Kingdom. It stokes a politics of ‘othering’, demonizing not only migrants and ‘foreigners’ but also judges, economists, intellectuals and experts, not to mention the BBC. And it stokes new divisions, within workplaces, neighbourhoods and families. Such divisions are painful and deeply personal.

It follows that struggles over culture and language matter as much, perhaps, as the struggles to defend the rights hard fought for by generations of women. But struggles over culture and language and struggles to defend – or even enlarge – equality and rights are inextricably linked and are brought together to good effect in this volume. The work of the women described here resonates with my own earlier research on feminist inspired activism in the UK in the second half of the 20th century¹. I coined the term ‘spaces of power’ to denote the contradictory experiences of women who tangled with governmental logics (policy discourses, legislative enactments, institutional reform programmes) and who drew on government/local government /EU funding in order to pursue transformational political change. The changes sought by women activists (community-based action, democratic innovation, more participative leadership, the coproduction

¹Newman, Janet (2012) *Working the Spaces of Power; activism, neoliberalism and gendered labour*. London, Bloomsbury.

of social policies, gender mainstreaming) may have been appropriated as governments sought to enable neoliberal rationalities to permeate the social landscape. These spaces of power were by no means benign, but nor were they necessarily the site of incorporation.

The women activists' accounts that are captured in this volume show how they used the governmental spaces constituted by the policies and institutions of the EU, and explore their experiences – and losses – associated with the changes wrought by Brexit. The austerity policies of the 21st century, and the anti-feminist climate associated with the rise of populist politics across Europe and beyond, has closed many of the spaces of power women had found productive of change. The rupturing of transnational networks, coupled by the withdrawal of EU funding, is having damaging consequences. They were generative of new forms of solidarity and prefigured new political movements – on climate change, environmental protection, open borders – many of which became enshrined in European laws and institutions.

Of course, the EU is not a benign entity or a comfortable space; rather it is a site of contradictory political projects and contested imaginaries. It is an agent for the expansion and enforcement of neoliberal agendas yet is also a space in which equality and human rights agendas have flourished. It has imposed austerity measures on some member states, but has also offered resources, institutions, connections and political spaces that offer the possibility of pursuing progressive agendas. Questions now surround the survival of such spaces as Brexit and its aftermath threaten the coherence and resilience of this 'social' Europe. Within the UK, the decade of austerity saw the closure of many feminist-inspired projects that had benefited from EU funding and support. And Brexit is a profoundly anti-feminist phenomenon, driven by the rise of populist political forces that seek to erode democratic participation and to foster the demonisation of women activists and politicians, as well as judges, courts, experts and the state itself. It fosters a political culture characterised by hardened divisions and the legitimisation of misogynistic and racist abuse.

For me, the re-assertion of activist voices represented in this volume offers a measure of hope in a dire political landscape. Currently the Brexit agenda has been displaced from the headlines by the Coronavirus pandemic. Paradoxically this has opened up new platforms on which gender politics are being played out. The pandemic has expanded and made more visible women's work in communities, forging neighbourhood networks of support, working in food banks, delivering essential supplies to those who cannot get out, and offering on-line or telephone support to overcome the social isolation of vulnerable households. We are translating the gendered norms of care and responsibility to this new world, dusting off sewing machines to produce PPE, face masks and other necessities to overcome the deficiencies of government in meeting needs. We form a large part of the flood of volunteers supplementing the work of professionals in the context of governmental failures. And our work is attempting to ameliorate some of the harms produced by the eruption of the virus – notably, but not only, domestic abuse – in a social world already eviscerated by the ravages of austerity and the cultural divisions of Brexit.

We are once again the brokers and intermediaries of a changing social landscape. It is women who are, in the main, managing the constraints and restrictions of lockdown. It is largely the labour of women that has generated more expansive vocabularies of care that transcend – and connect – domestic, neighbourhood and institutional settings. And we are witnessing a new visibility of highly gendered occupations – nursing, care work, teaching, shop work and personal service industries. Public support for women working in such low paid, and now highly dangerous, occupations has been highly visible, not least in weekly clapping ceremonies. It is possible that such support will offer a measure of protection in government decisions about who is to bear the cost of the recession to come. However, I remain sceptical about the possible outcomes of this future in the absence of a politics explicitly informed by feminism – a politics that might redress the silencings produced by Brexit and the wider climate of populist politics.

Introduction: Feminist Resistance in a Brexit Environment

Sue Cohen and Margaret Page

In September 2017, we sat in a café on Gloucester Road in Bristol with a small group of women discussing feminist resistance in a Brexit environment. We all in our different ways had a history of feminist activism, working to promote women's equality in a variety of roles at local, national and transnational levels in public and voluntary sector organisations, trade unions, and local government. During the 1990s, membership of the EU and Council of Europe enabled us to form partnerships across borders and differences to develop equality practices to promote equality and eliminate discrimination. Membership of the EU enabled representatives of women's organisations to participate directly in the policy process with national representatives of other member states, and provided mechanisms to call the UK government to account where equality protocols were not adequately implemented. This had been a lifeline when national governments were hostile or indifferent to equality agendas.

A great deal of this activity was funded through EU programmes, during and after the Delors period 1985–2000. Here we found spaces to share and develop equality practice across nations and difference and to develop intersectional partnerships to combat poverty, racism, gender violence and discrimination (Cohen, 2000; Conley & Page, 2015). We associated feminist internationalism with liberation at a very personal level, having experienced through collaborative practices, a glimpse of the world we were trying to create, and we were changed by the process, seeing glimmers of possibilities writ large (Page, 1997). Through the relationships forged with others, and the processes of learning that took place, we experienced together a different way of being. The experience of learning from others who were working towards similar goals informed by different contexts and cultures within EU funded programmes, lent legitimacy when taking the necessary risks to work across the grain of established equal opportunities practice, inspiring the political commitment necessary to make change happen (Page, 2009).

We understood and critiqued EU social initiatives designed ultimately to sustain social cohesion within the capitalist market economy of the economic union, embodied in the ethos of EU political institutions, the Council of Ministers in particular. At the same time, we experienced ways in which the Delors era with its proliferation of social cohesion programmes and consultative committees provided some space for social movements to network, share visions and develop

partnerships that furthered equality measures and anti-discriminatory initiatives. Although the leadership in some social movements mirrored power differentials in civil society, many of us ‘felt engaged in a political process which was living, dynamic, in process’ (Cohen, 2000, p. 36).

The Brexit campaign threatened to extinguish all memory and record of that dynamism. From when the referendum campaign was launched in February 2016, those of us sitting together in the café had struggled to find networks, spaces and settings to forge any kind of meaningful feminist fight-back against leaving the EU. We co-authors (Sue and Margaret) had just come back from Athens where we had delivered a paper on those struggles to the ESA bi-annual conference (*Un) Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities* – and wanted to share the experience (ESA, 2017) with our feminist friends. ‘Critical Europeanism’ had been the overriding ethos of the conference. At the conference presentations drew our attention to movements against ‘gender ideology’ that were gaining momentum within post-socialist states (see e.g. Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Rawłuszko, 2019), characterising EU derived gender mainstreaming policies and equal rights as counter cultural, imposed by what they regarded as external hostile institutions such as the UN and the EU. We began in Athens to understand Brexit in this wider context in which populist neo-liberal and religious right-wing patriarchal forces were on the rise throughout Europe (EU Parliament, 2018; Zaviršek & Rajgelj, 2018).

Back in Bristol, our ‘café society’ discussions opened up reflections on transformative practices and concepts introduced at the conference, amongst them ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ (Tarow & della Porta, 2005). More pragmatically, there was potential for a book proposal, an invitation from the Emerald editor at the conference in Athens who had happened upon our paper there. Our activist friends encouraged us to follow it up.

However, driven by a sense of urgency we parked the book idea and began to focus much of our spare time on planning a symposium that would bring together grassroots activists, academics, trade unionists and community leaders from the four nations of the UK. Our purpose was to consider the impact of Brexit on women’s equality, across intersections of race, class, citizenship and nation, to widen the Brexit debate from the predominant non-gendered discourse on the single market and freedom of movement. The symposium took place in May 2018, supported by the Universities of Bristol, UWE and Bath. Participants shared practitioner, activist, interdisciplinary research and personal perspectives on gender, race equality and constitutional law, employment rights, intersectional gendered economics, austerity, violence against women, migration, EU nationhood, civic engagement, women’s activism. We considered how we might protect and extend rights and resources for promoting women’s equality in the four nations and how protective regulations, anti-discrimination and anti-racist organising could be furthered to challenge racism, hate crime and gender violence (Cohen & Page, 2018).

The symposium had been organised at short notice and with little financial support. Participants were driven by a shared sense of purpose and this lent a buzz and a sense of shared commitment to discussion. We had no institutional channels or resource for developing joint work but came up with the concept of Women’s Inclusive Democracy in Europe Network (WIDEN) that was to become

both the trigger and grounding for this book, with many of the participants at the symposium contributing to the chapters. We envisioned a book that would reflect contributors' journeys, both personal and political, a snapshot of diverse feminist responses to Brexit.

Less than a year after the symposium we had our book proposal accepted, in the midst of one of the most politically turbulent eras since the second world war, the best and worst of times to be producing a book on Brexit. During the highs and the lows of our ensuing conversations in cafes and at kitchen tables, we agreed that the book writing process helped us to keep our heads above water: it became 'a small act of resistance' in braving the storm.

Since the book was written, we have plunged into a crisis that we could never have anticipated: The storm unleashed by Covid-19. Once again, the role of the state and of government in protecting those living in the UK from poverty, racism, gender violence and discrimination, are under scrutiny. The capacity of leaders, the balancing of health, wellbeing and the economy, the role of women in all their diversity as carers and health workers, and as partners in the home, are now subject to debate. We return to these parallel themes in our conclusions.

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Section I

From the Political to the Personal and Back Again: Reclaiming Belonging

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Chapter 1

How Brexit is Changing Women's Lives

Sue Cohen and Margaret Page

Women as 'Other'

Much of the debate in the UK pre and post the EU referendum has been on the single market and freedom of movement. Women's voices have barely been heard, with women's equality all but cleansed from Brexit political and media discourses. Analysis by Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Communication and Culture found that leading up to the referendum, men accounted for 82.5% of all print and broadcast commentators and presenters ([Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2016](#)).

Prior to the referendum feminist campaign, organisations were focussed on the impact of the government's increasingly stringent austerity measures. Research by the Women's Budget Group anticipated that over a 10-year period (2010–2020) women in female-headed households would experience a 20% drop in income as a result of cuts to public services, benefits and employment ([De Henau & Reed, 2016](#)). Brexit was not seen as central, unless you were for example, a non-UK EU national, at the sharp end of the hostile environment, or a feminist in Northern Ireland where the Peace Agreement was at stake.

From where we are now, and through the many conversations with contributors to this edited collection, we have come to understand that the manner in which the Brexit debate was conducted not only marginalised women's equality but also called into question the meaning of democracy, nationhood, citizenship and participatory processes. During the debate, two successive governments showed themselves willing to stop at nothing to 'get Brexit done', including placing the Union with Scotland and the Peace Treaty with Northern Ireland not only at risk, but potentially expendable. Both nations were Pro-Remain.

We, and the contributors to this book, argue that women's voices on equality and discrimination must be made both explicit and integral to all negotiations on the future relationship of the UK to the EU. We note that as we write, women's voices outside of political parties are leading this challenge. Whilst women did

become more present as the Brexit debate unfolded, they were not with a few exceptions concerned with women's equality and diversity. This book seeks to address that gap. In essence, Brexit needs to be gender-proofed, with a lens on the intersections between discrimination and oppression experienced by women in diverse communities and of diverse identities.

The Rise of Populism

Immediately after the referendum, hate crimes in the UK rose (NPCC, in Bassel & Akwugo, 2018, p. 118) in a climate of increasing ideologically driven political aggression stoked up by nationalist, populist, misogynist and racist rhetoric with minimal commentary and intervention from leading political figures. Pro-Brexit political parties have spread deliberate misinformation, harnessing social media to blur the difference between ideologically driven reporting and evidence-based sense making (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019).

This phenomenon is not confined to the UK and Brexit but is part of a pattern that has emerged amongst populist leaders in Europe, the United States and beyond. In France, Marine le Pen in her widely reported 2017 election appealed to feminist values such as freedom from sexual violence, to bolster anti-migrant rhetoric.¹ In the UK, Stella Creasy was targeted by US-based anti-abortion campaigners in the 2019 election campaign (Boycott, 2020; Townsend, 2019).

Nationalist, conservative, right-wing populist forces are not new but have gained traction in the economic, social and political insecurities endemic since the global financial crash of 2007–2008. Within post-socialist and EU member states, campaigns against 'gender ideology' have sought to position gender equality and gender mainstreaming as counter cultural and anti-family, and to undermine national and international measures to protect women's rights (European Parliament, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Nikoghosyan, 2015). Završek and Rajgelj (2018) analyse how the growth of insecurities in post-socialist states has been exploited within populist political discourse:

the ideals of democracy, human rights, and equality have been countered in the last two decades, by an increasingly vocal conservative public, notably through a political discourse in which sexism, anti-semitism, racism, and hatred of refugees are coalesced into an ideology ... The politics of hatred flourishes, having gained legitimacy also in the spheres of parliamentary and state politics. (p. 8)

¹Chrisafis. (2017). We feel very close to her': can 'fake feminist' Marine Le Pen win the female vote? *The Guardian Newspaper*, March 18. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/18/front-national-anger-marine-le-pen-female-supporters>. Accessed on June 15, 2020.