EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 21.08.2017 | Charlotte O'Brien

Bro-xit

There's only one woman on the UK Brexit negotiating team – here's why that matters

It has emerged that the team being sent to Brussels to lead on talks to take Britain out of the EU includes just one woman – out of nine named negotiators.

This imbalance is not only embarrassing. It's negligent. Failing to include women on the frontline of this incredibly important process jeopardises the quality of the negotiations.

Men don't know what's best for women

Having women on your team matters – and not just because of optics. It affects the quality of the laws that are made. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 were both passed by parliaments that were 96 percent male and 4 percent female. Both pieces of legislation are great achievements on the surface but both were deeply flawed. The original equal pay rules required a job evaluation survey, effectively meaning that women had to seek permission from their employers (back then: men) to mount an equal pay claim. Until the EU intervened, the Sex Discrimination Act appeared to require pregnant women to be compared to sick men, making it easier to sack them. This unfavourable treatment on the grounds of pregnancy was not considered sex discrimination.

When it comes to decision-making that isn't about equality, the male tilt of the law is even more problematic. Men are less likely to notice when something may be bad for women. So we live with decisions excluding part-time workers (disproportionately women) from rights, or excluding carers (disproportionately women) from rights. We live with budgetary decisions that are funded by cutting public sector employment (disproportionately impacting women) or by depriving lone parents (disproportionately women) of welfare and support.

Indeed, when the imbalance on the Brexit team first came to light, a

House of Lords committee asked David Davis, secretary of state for exiting the EU, to clarify how many women were on his team. He did not know. He had not noticed.

Brexit is a feminist issue

The galaxy of complexity involved in the Brexit negotiations makes the silencing of women all the more concerning. Faced with a mountain of questions in need of resolution within a limited timeframe, the negotiators will look for solutions that seem easy to them.

Pressure to get the job done could create costs that end up being paid for with more women-punishing austerity.

The UK's proposal on the rights of EU citizens in the UK also makes various assumptions that could have negative implications for women.

It is vague on the meaning of "lawful residence" and on the conditions that will be attached to qualifying for temporary residence after Brexit. The existing rules ignore the impact of domestic violence on a woman's residence status, since it can interrupt her work history, and make it impossible to stay in her partners' household. The rules also make it harder for women to establish a right to reside if they combine domestic care for the elderly or disabled or being a single parent with part time work.

Women and children are already overlooked, and are at significant risk of falling through the cracks in the new regime.

When it comes to conditions attached to any future trade agreement, such as compliance with EU workplace rights, key women's rights are at stake too. Rights relating to pregnancy discrimination, to compensation for discrimination, to safety for breastfeeding mothers, to paid time off for antenatal appointments, and to equal treatment for part-time workers, are guaranteed through EU law. The nature of the withdrawal process, the commitments made, and the procedures for enforcing rights, will have gendered impacts.

Women improve decision-making

Having women at the table is not just important for making sure women's concerns are heard. Women improve decision making. The European Network on Gender Equalityargues that women "in greater than token proportions improve decision-making; improve

shareholder value; and lower risk-taking". The European Commission has also found that women are rather good at doing business – reporting that companies with more women on their boards had a 53 percent higher return on equity.

On the specific issue of negotiation skills, evidence suggests that women are just as successful as men.

Too often, the myth of meritocracy is trotted out when people are asked to justify the gender imbalance on their teams. They point to experience, knowledge or qualifications, each defined to reproduce existing power and privilege. This has been called the "social magic of merit". It is an illusion, in which the terms for measuring merit are set by those in charge, to mean 'like us'.

If we're looking for knowledge and understanding, we could start right at the top of the Brexit team. Davis has, after all, been criticised for failing to grasp even the basics of EU law when he suggested trading with Germany and Poland.

And since the UK has not had to lead international trade negotiations for more than 40 years, no one is experienced in the art of Brexit. It should therefore be the ultimate equaliser. Yet just one woman is representing the nation at a crucial moment in its history.

In 1970 the UK sent an all male negotiating delegation to get the UK into Europe. So at least the addition of one is progress. At this rate, we can look forward to women being equally represented on international negotiating panels in another 188 years.

This article first appeared in The Conversation



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