Feminist democracy in a Brexit environment - a political dynamic more than hegemony

*When you do things together with others, you hold that inside you - a glimpse of the world you are trying to create*

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Introduction:

The co-authors of this paper have come together as feminist activists who are also researchers. Between us we represent several organisations with a mission to promote and defend women’s equality, working with local, regional and national and international policy networks in the process¹. All of us have played a leading role in setting up organisations which have interrelated with infrastructures evolved from the architecture to promote women’s equality in diverse local communities, developed with feminists in NGOs, public services and government. Each of us has contributed to research to support campaigning in and through these organisations and networks, but also more widely to support democratic processes - at a local government level, with EU policy-making institutions and with the Council of Europe. We consider this work to be a part of the generally unfunded and under resourced infrastructure that is necessary to defend and embed mechanisms to promote gender mainstreaming and further its transformative potential.

It is in and through our lived experience of activism that we have developed a vision of what feminist democracy could be like. Margaret Page, remembering her participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women and NGO forum in Beijing, 1995, described her experience of being one of an estimated 40,000 women (Page, 1997). The vision of so many women sitting together, sharing and strategizing, from their specific lived experience in different contexts and cultures, then negotiating and engaging with government delegations in drafting the Global Platform for Action, remains with her as a glimpse of democracy in action, a source of motivation to act. As co-authors and researchers we

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Bristol Women’s Commission | Bristol Women’s Voice: https://www.bristolwomensvoice.org.uk/bristol-womens-commission/
Fair Play South West: http://www.fairplaysouthwest.org.uk/
Women’s Budget Group: http://wbg.org.uk/
each write from this perspective – ‘When you do things together with others, you hold that inside you - a glimpse of the world you are trying to create’.

Feminist activism takes place in many sites and settings, often hidden from view (Cohen, 2000). When this collective agency comes together in public arenas interrelating with political institutions, it can become visible as feminist democracy in action. Local government can open up such opportunities. Currently our joint campaigning is employment focused in Bristol and includes women’s access to employment in a local enterprise zone, equal pay and employment conditions, and for childcare and caring responsibilities to be resourced by government as infrastructure.

In the EU referendum campaign we worked with our MEP to raise awareness of how the EU has enabled trade unions to campaign for part time workers and win employment rights ². One of our priorities now, in the context of Brexit, is to build this campaign to defend women’s equality legislation and policy directives. We aim to raise awareness of how UK membership of the EU has contributed to extending women’s rights, and how feminist activism has played a key role in creating equalities standards, getting governments to become signatories, and then creating mechanisms for compliance and implementation nationally and locally in the UK. Our aim is to create a focused space and public environment where researchers and activists can work together to this end.

**Why Brexit matters to feminists**

Feminist researchers and activists in the UK, and in EU member states, are now faced with a conundrum. The rise of populism and the discrediting of EU institutions, has led to Brexit in the UK – a decision to exit the EU. Yet the EU is the polity that has supported and driven social democratic measures to promote gender equality when the UK state government has been reluctant to do so. In this context we are faced with a challenge - how to make the case to protect the equality measures that have emerged from the EU as a policy environment and that have provided mechanisms for compliance.

This challenge will need to be addressed in the context of a bigger question (Walby 2015): will the EU restructure or disintegrate from challenges to its political dependence on finance capital? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this, we note that the EU cannot be assumed to be in a stable state, and that feminist activism will need to be ready to engage with potential crisis and reform.

Within Great Britain, the EU has been a crucial driver for gender equality legislation, and for gender mainstreaming (Rees, 2005; Walby 2011). Gender mainstreaming has provided local authorities and government with conceptual tools and a framework for developing mechanisms for exposing gender bias within public policy, and for introducing gender difference and inequality as a basis for equitable redistribution of and access to resources for women within public services (Conley and Page, 2015). Numerous studies demonstrate

² Women’s Employment EU Rights: [http://policybristol.blogs.bris.ac.uk/2017/03/14/womens-rights-gained-under-eu-law-must-not-be-lost-in-brexit/]
that feminist activism has played a crucial role in introducing and implementing this policy and legislation, and in promoting its transformative potential (see for example Conley and Page, 2015; Eisenstein, 1996; Page, 2011; Woodward, 2003, 2004). Levels of implementation are uneven, and interpretations of gender equality variable and contingent on local contexts (Rees, 2005). Woodward (2003), in her analysis of numerous empirical studies of enablers and disablers of effective implementation, summarises their findings:

Mainstreaming began initially by speaking the language of modern management, which is result driven, requiring instrumental and rational measurement. This may ultimately bring about a heightened ability for policy makers to deal with the cross-cutting problems of inequality that breach rational models. However, the mission to mainstream gender concerns into all areas of policy will ultimately require a fundamental commitment from those in power. Settings where political groups hope to reverse the progress of equality can use mainstreaming in dangerous ways, dismantling women’s policy machinery and committing no resources in their place. Public organizations are, "at root," political. Without a consideration of power relationships, the transformative potential of mainstreaming will come to naught (p. 20).

Research on the effectiveness of gender equality legislation in public services in Great Britain, and in Australia, arrives at similar conclusions. Conley and Page (2015, 2016) research the transformative potential of the Gender Equality Duty through detailed case studies of implementation in five local authorities. They find that gender mainstreaming has been effective where there was strong political commitment, from individuals in positions of power and authority, and strong local feminist independent organisations ready to push for implementation and call the local authority to account. Where left labour political regimes were replaced with liberal or conservative governments, social democratic equality measures were replaced with new liberal market driven notions of equality. The language of gender mainstreaming was then used to rationalise loss of gender expert resources and cuts in funding of women’s organisations, in the context of the introduction of austerity. The sustainability of gender mainstreaming was then reliant on the extent to which commitment and understanding was embedded in the organisational culture. Political leadership was essential but not sufficient to drive gender mainstreaming. Robust internal procedures for integrating gender equality within service planning and resource allocation, required strong external advocacy, a feminist knowledge base and expert resources, and support for a developmental, rather than a technocratic approach (Conley and Page 2016; Page, 2011; Bacchi and Eveline, 2005).

If the UK is to hold onto gains made towards gender equality in legislation and public policy, there needs to be political commitment in Brexit negotiations to adopt comparable regulatory measures. Yet social infrastructure and gender have been all but cleansed from political and media Brexit discourses. Moreover within these discourses the “public”, economics and the market, have little or no synthesis with the “private” - social infrastructure, social care, childcare, reproductive rights, domestic relations, or community inclusion. Brexit threatens to remove vital resources for promoting gender equality, weakening legislation, and undermining local political commitment to gender mainstreaming, together with the resources and tools for compliance and monitoring. This will be particularly damaging in the context of austerity, the potential fragmentation of the
EU, and a UK right wing government intent on weakening regulation and with it equality legislation and mechanisms for compliance. Meanwhile gender equality is being taken up and incorporated within some new liberal discourses (Walby, 2003). While the upsurge in support for manifestos based on socialism and social democracy in recent UK elections offer opportunity, their predominant political discourses barely engage with feminist concerns.

The making of feminist democracy

Within EU institutions, member states and local government, feminists have played a key role in developing and implementing mechanisms for mainstreaming gender equality and monitoring compliance within democratic processes. While many of the advances made have been eroded under austerity, recent research has found some evidence that strategies are emerging for protecting the gains made through new forms of activism (Durbin, Page and Walby 2017). This research analyses the ways in which collective political agency can critically engage with, and not be limited by, predominant neoliberal discourses and practices. New forms of collective agency are emerging, both within and independent of the state, trade unions, and anti-austerity campaigns. Feminist researchers and activists are investigating the constructs of gender that underpin their engagement, the forms of organised resistance that are emerging, and how these are shaped in specific institutional contexts. This paper takes inspiration from these studies to discuss how feminist researchers can support grassroots organisations in the SW region of England to influence and engage with Brexit in the context of neoliberal austerity measures that are already undermining social infrastructure and support services for women in the region.

In this section we introduce two case studies, to analyse how local and national activists achieved local and national results for women through engaging with supranational processes. The first of these is set in the context of the early days of the Delors presidency and analyses opportunities and challenges of engaging with EU process from the perspectives of those involved in the setting up of the Single Parent Action Network under the Third European Poverty Programme. In the second case study we move to the current context of Brexit in Great Britain, and analyse how local activists created an institutional basis for promoting gender mainstreaming within Bristol City Council, using the Council of Europe Charter for Women and Men in Public Life.

In our conclusions we will reflect on how researchers can engage with activists to support initiatives to promote democratic gender equality strategies within the Brexit negotiations.

Case study: Single Parent Action network (SPAN): A multi-ethnic single parent group, that developed national and EU networks in combatting one parent family poverty – Sue Cohen

EU member states may look with some mystification at the politics of the UK that have led to Brexit, but a right wing Eurosceptic government has been here before, furthering deeply embedded poverty, and working to keep social democratic policies of the EU at arms length, exemplified for example in the treatment of single parent motherhood. Not only was there no such thing as society according to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the very notion of poverty was also being challenged. I was in lobbying meetings with the European Anti-Poverty Network when the UK Government wanted to remove the word “poverty” from the EU Poverty Programme. John Moore, the Social Security Secretary at the time had
decided that there was no such thing as absolute poverty in the UK and that relative poverty was in fact social inequality and should be described as such (Lansley, S. 2010). And yet under a Thatcher government, the steep rise in child poverty in the UK was the worst of any country in the EU. Indeed, between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s the UK had the highest increase in child poverty of any OECD country. (Bradshaw 2009) Structured unemployment meant that high numbers of one parent families were reliant on benefits at a time when numbers were increasing. Rather than address their needs with supportive policies to move families out of poverty, the Conservative government led a concerted campaign to discredit single parent mothers, a campaign taken up by the press and media.

In this climate grassroots one parent family organisations working to address poverty would receive no government funding, or public support. And yet at an EU level under the social cohesion initiatives of the Delors period, a small, multi-racial grassroots group of single parents in Bristol was able to jump over the national government to the European Commission, and receive funding under the Third European Poverty Programme to not only develop a network of self-help groups across the UK, but to engage in transnational exchanges with anti-poverty groups across the EU. I coordinated the setting up and development of Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) and interrelated with many of those involved in transnational anti-poverty networks at the time, who found it difficult to understand why child poverty was so rife, or indeed, why single parent mothers were so vilified in the UK. This disbelief is echoed by many EU representatives today who are querying why the UK would want to head towards increasing poverty under a Brexit deal.

Walby (2003 a) has highlighted the extent to which progressive regulation of gender equity has increasingly happened in public spaces. However, single parent mothers, given their lack of access to the public domain, were hidden from view in UK gender equity initiatives, and indeed from feminist concerns in public arenas of the period given the focus on the glass ceiling, pensions and equal pay. In contrast, the setting up of the Single Parent Action Network within the Third European Poverty Programme brought single parents with experience of poverty from different backgrounds and cultures into relation with some of the political institutions of the EU – the European Commission, the Committee on Women’s Rights and lobbying groups and networks – including the European Anti-Poverty Network and the European Women’s Lobby.

There are a number of reasons why these networks grew in influence during this period. Although many social initiatives funded by the European Commission were designed to sustain cohesion in a capitalist system, transnational emancipatory movements continued to have some room for manoeuvre for furthering liberationist democracy at an international level. Cross-national pressure from social democratic parties and emancipatory movements helped to create greater potential for anti-poverty and gender mainstreaming initiatives in the EU. Together with the Delors period’s focus on social democracy underpinned by a discourse on notions of social cohesion, partnership and participation, a vast number of funding streams, programmes and projects administered by the European Commission became focused on “social solidarity” (Cohen, 2000).

SPAN went on to set up the European Network of One Parent Families alongside Gingerbread Northern Ireland, whilst in the UK developing a network of self-help groups of
over 1000 member groups across the four nations. In the process, single parent members developed deeper understandings of gender equity policies to combat poverty, and integrated these into pilot initiatives in different areas of the UK, supporting in the process the integration of one parent families into the public policy domain. One of these initiatives was a Participatory One Parent Proofing Toolkit developed out of the contributions of single parents in different parts of England, Scotland and Wales, working alongside researchers to contextualize one parent proofing of employment, welfare and childcare policies at a local and national level (Giullari and Wright 2007). Important influences for learning were Theresa Rees’s work as advisor to the European Commission on gender equality, visioning women in the mainstream and Majella Kilkey’s research on moving forward from the adult worker to a more dynamic model facilitating transitions between care-giving and employment. Both contributed to influencing the work of the single parent inclusion networks in the European Network of One Parent Families (Cohen, 2002). SPAN used the learning from processes of this kind to influence national anti-poverty and feminist agendas in the early part of this century.

However, at a national/transnational level, as the Delors period came to an end, so EU funding for “social solidarity” networks across the EU began to wane. Some would argue that the ensuing period contributed to a democratic deficit within nation states in that social movements would have less influence on EU social and economic policy, and citizens less opportunity to engage with the politics of the EU. This was exacerbated in the UK by a Coalition government that closed down government advisory groups that had been partly informed by EU integration and gender mainstreaming strategies, most notably the Women’s Commission and the Social Inclusion Advisory Committee. Women’s grassroots groups and infrastructure networks also lost funding, at a time when poverty amongst single parents increased dramatically. Single parents, whatever their qualifications were more likely to end up in low paid employment, close to home so that they could balance their childcare (Haux and Salmon et al, 2012).

Although austerity ended government funding for most women’s infrastructure organisations, the European Commission has continued to support with matched funding, those women considered furthest away from the labour market. SPAN’s Single Parent Study Centre in Bristol was set up as a model action project with a range of learning, training and social action initiatives, together with a multi cultural crèche. With over 50 workers and many hundreds of volunteers, the Study Centre involved single parents from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds who at the same time experienced common oppressions – poverty, lack of childcare, unemployment, with many escaping violence and abuse (Cohen and McDermont, 2016). A substantial percentage of the funding for improving the life chances of local single parents and their children in Bristol came from EU funding streams, matched by Trust and local government funding.

Case study 2- Bristol Women’s Commission:
A local example of using international standards to strengthen gender equality - Diane Bunyan

In 2006 the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (the organisation of local government organisations) agreed Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life (http://www.ccre.org/docs/charte_egalite_en.pdf). The Charter was developed following
three international workshops in different parts of Europe and with the input of elected representatives and officials working on gender equality. I drafted the charter using my experience of being a local councilor. The aim is to translate international standards such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the European Charter for Fundamental Rights and the Human Rights Convention into suggested practical actions that local and regional bodies can take to make these high level rights a reality for women.

The Charter covers the various competencies of these bodies; the political role; the employer role; public procurement and contracts; service delivery; planning and sustainable development; the regulator role and twinning and international co-operation.

There are now 1651 signatories in 33 countries. Signatories have to make a public declaration of their commitment to gender equality and produce an action plan of how they are going to deliver on their priority actions. These plans are available and monitored by the EU Gender Institute. The Charter is used by the UN as an example of good practice, and versions have been adopted in South America and East Africa.

In 2012 the Chair of Bristol Women’s Voice, a broad network of women and women focused organisations committed to gender equality, persuaded the newly elected mayor to sign the Charter which he did in front of an audience on International Women’s Day 2012.

The Charter requires a body to oversee the delivery of the action plan and we did this by getting the mayor to set up the Bristol Women’s Commission. This has high level representatives from business, universities, the voluntary sector, council, health, police, local media, West of England Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and education. The Commission has set up Task Groups on health, the economy, education, transport, safety, representation and business involving experts and community activists across the city. The Action Plan is now presented as a Wo-manifesto for Bristol with calls to action for a whole range of bodies that will be asked to publicly account on progress.

The commission has had some notable successes e.g. getting a chapter on women’s health in Bristol City’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessment; getting businesses and organisations to take action on zero tolerance of gender based violence; getting the Evening Post newspaper to move the Women in Business Awards away from a hotel hosting talks by a convicted abuser of women; commenting on the lack of a gender dimension in the LEP Strategic Plan; and getting a place on the new nomination committee for the LEP and on the Brexit and European Structural Investment Fund Committees. A further example of changing attitudes was that the hustings for the second mayor election showed that candidates took women’s issues seriously and had at least done some research and increased their awareness of what these issues are and what actions they might take to address them.

The combination of a high level body made up of influential women with an active network of women and women’s organisations, has delivered progress. Translating international

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3 https://www.bristolwomensvoice.org.uk
standards into local action with some means of publicly calling actors to account is an example of how we can strengthen gender equality post Brexit.

**Mobilising Movements for Feminist Democracy**

How are women mobilised to strive for feminist democracy in institutional spaces, and achieve more than the sustainability of political and economic hegemony? Feminist activism has historically been nurtured in "the private", driven by embodied experience of marginalisation and discrimination in both public and private arenas, by grassroots and identity politics, by passion for change. (Cohen, 2000) Given that there continues to be a disassociation between the public and the private in political settings, what can we learn from the case studies that motivate us to work together in a Brexit environment, for feminist democracy?

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How collectively do we get to that space and combat the resigned public weariness of debates on Brexit, and indeed the disassociation that many women experience in that debate. What can we learn from the case studies?

- That European, international and global women's movements inspire - that there is a need to act both globally and locally. Grassroots women's movements are mobilised and energised by these international networks and the iterative processes involved - for example the sharing of more dynamic model policies for "facilitating transitions between care-giving and employment."

- That national right wing neoliberals environments force women’s movements to find creative ways of mobilizing. These movements may still use the instruments of political and economic mainstreaming though routes may be more circuitous. Strategic pressure can be placed on national government by using political institutions and regulatory instruments at a local, regional and international level.

- That the potential loss of international pressure from EU social movements and social democratic parties visioning women in the mainstream, will need to be addressed. The Council of Europe is one way forward, using such instruments as the Council of European Municipalities Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life in mobilizing feminists at a local/regional level.

- That feminists, both activists and researchers, need to be vigilant in involving those with the greatest knowledge of poverty and discrimination. Neo-liberal regimes are generally accompanied by both new and increased forms of overriding poverty and discrimination. Not only are the voices of those who experience the worst forms of discrimination not heard in the public domain, but divide and rule politics may lead to vilification and further marginalisation in the process, especially in the case of single parents and migrant families.

- That participatory research and action has the capacity to inform and empower at a local, national and international level and that international experience and research is vital in connecting with activists and grassroots women’s movements.
• That feminist democracy is informed by the interrelationship between the private and the public.

**Challenges to the Mobilisation of Feminist Democracy Beyond Brexit**

Research undertaken with grass roots women involved in anti-poverty movements at an EU level indicated they had been uncertain that social inclusion could be achieved even within these networks, given the power differentials that mirrored power differentials in society in general. And yet: “They nevertheless felt engaged in a political process which was living, dynamic, in process. This process often took place in alternative sites to the political hegemony, settings which were seemingly fragmented, hidden from view. However, when women involved in social action moved into a political arena, there were times when their combined understandings formed a body of experience that seized the moment, claimed the space, changed the political direction” (Cohen, 2000 pp. 36).

However, although there are notable successes at EU level particularly through the work of the Committee on Women’s Rights, and the European Women’s Lobby, a critical area of contention in the mobilization of feminist activism at a nation state level across the EU has been the absence of a European collective consciousness including a public space to debate those politics. This has contributed to confusion resulting from ill-defined notions of democracy on which the EU is based (Cohen, 2000; Hoskyns and Newman, 2000; Woodward, 2003).

Even under the Delors period, anti-poverty networks that involved women and people in poverty, as well as those working to combat racism and xenophobia faced uphill struggles. The European Commission, in order to manage pluralistic demands, had worked to draw these different interests together into “corporatist” bodies that would mediate between different interest groups in their negotiations with EU institutions. But these bodies were often likely to mirror power differentials in society with regard to gender, ethnicity, class etc. and could occasion conflict and struggle in their governing processes. Cohen, (2000) explores the Durkheimian roots of the Delors period noting the “remarkable disassociation in EU arenas of the private from the public, grassroots politics from EU politics, embodied experience from formal debate, the personal from the political…..That which is dominant is that which is normal. Those emancipatory struggles that are hidden from view tend not to be addressed until they become mainstream concerns” (Cohen, 2000 pp. 30-31).

Public scepticism about the role of the EU political institutions and their bureaucratic role has impacted on the ability to mobilise social movements in nation states to further the potential for greater democracy. Transparency around how the institutions operate has been found wanting. For example, the level of unaccountable bureaucracy at EU level is less a result of the Parliament’s decision-making processes, but rather a product of the plethora of administrative and management committees set up to manage the business between the European Commission and the Council of Ministers when supervising the implementation of policy. “Comotology” as it is described, frustrates the democratic process with regard to accountability in decision-making. It failed to be controlled or regulated by Maastricht even though European Parliament had recommended restrictions. Strengthening the Parliament and control of comotology has since been seen as a way
forward. However, at this moment in time the notion of what is referred to as “the two level game” still prevails. The underlying discourse of Brexiteers with regard to “taking back control” is that the entity of the nation state predominates as the preserve of democracy, with EU institutions juxtaposed as elitist decision-making bodies (Hoskyns, 2000 pp. 176 - 200).

Feminists, who do not directly interface with the politics and policies emanating from the EU, can hardly be said to be galvanized to protect the institutions and their regulatory controls. The contradiction of mobilising at an EU level, without investment in participatory action for social and economic inclusion at a national and grassroots level, has for a long time contributed to a democratic deficit that has been paralleled elsewhere in the EU. Fewer than half of the EU voters favoured membership of the Union at the end of the last century, with structures and values placed on citizens by EU institutions seen to be restricting rather than promoting civic participation. (Leonard, 1998) Subsidiarity, where decisions are in theory supposed to be taken as close to the citizen as possible, has had an uneven impact across the EU.

Hoskyns highlighted the absence of a “European domestic politics”, a sense of civic belonging to the EU project together with access to channels of influence (Hoskyns, 2000 pp. 177) This disconnect was paralleled during the referendum in the UK which meant that women's movements were not mobilised by the Remain campaign having no public arena where feminist ideas could be integrated and debated. The challenge now is how feminists can forge such a space in a Brexit environment.

**Brexit: what is at stake?**

Disturbingly, under a hard Brexit, the potential for UK activists to join with other social movements in effecting change for disadvantaged groups across the EU, is likely to be virtually eradicated. The case studies demonstrate that what is at stake is so much more than legislation. Also at stake is loss of architecture of compliance that feminists have created, and that is already being undermined daily by: the rolling back of the welfare state; membership of a policy environment committed to feminist equality within social democracy; and access to resources that make participation, and activist networks, possible. The EU, and Council of Europe, have offered resources and an environment within which we can engage with a changing political, economic and social context in order to develop strategies to protect and promote aspirations for women's economic and financial independence, and participation in public life from a position of equality. In the process we have fought for and developed initiatives and research that take into account women's intersectional cross cutting life experiences and aspirations. But what is the future of the EU, and how much of this can we rely on to continue within the EU itself? The rise of right wing populist governments of member states may erode these principles and tip the balance towards neo liberal social policy.

However in the 21st century the mainstream is now concerned with gender equality, no longer aspirational rhetoric confined to some EU social democratic parties. What has shifted? Walby demonstrates (2003) that reform of gender relations was first taken up by national governments and by the EU as an employment driven state concern. She argues that modernization gender regimes, and their transition from a domestic to a public form is taking place in most Western countries. This modernisation, driven by actors in civil
society, the state and the labour market, and in each of these domains, feminist activists, includes the move of women’s labour from the household to the market, the increased presence of women in the state, and the increased permeability of the family, but also the criminalization of men’s violence to women, the increase in rights to bodily integrity, including control over fertility (Walby, 2009). The development of the EU and its increased powers in the context of globalisation has played a crucial role in regulating the labour market, increasing prospects of employment for women, and creating a new political constituency of working women who are articulating their perceived interest in policies that assist in combining home and work. Nevertheless, this transition is also producing complex new forms of inequality, not least around displacement, as well as articulating with traditional forms of inequality around class, ethnicity, age and single parent motherhood.

The interests of the market are superceding as ever the interests of those marginalised by the market. This is demonstrated in what is already being lost in the UK following the Brexit referendum result. The potential impact of loss of regulatory frameworks is being documented by trade unions, and by MEPs on the EU FEM Committee (see for example http://www.claremoodymep.com/womenseurights). Government use of Brexit to diminish the power of regulatory frameworks is illustrated in a recent circular (Department for Exiting the European Union, July 2017):

‘I am writing to inform you that the Government has introduced the Repeal Bill to Parliament. This represents a significant milestone in the UK’s exit of the European Union.

The Repeal Bill will ensure that, once we have left the EU, our laws will not be made in Brussels but in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast. It will allow for a smooth and orderly exit by providing a functioning statute book of domestic law on the day we leave the EU.

For organisations in every sector of the UK economy, the Repeal Bill aims to maximise certainty, clarity and continuity, and ensure a stable transition as we leave the EU. Its purpose is to convert EU law as it applies in the UK at the point of exit, into domestic law that will continue to apply after we leave. The powers in the Bill ensure that, whatever the outcome of negotiations, and, wherever it is practical and sensible, the same laws and rules will still apply to businesses and civil society organisations, consumers and workers in the UK on the day after departure.

The Bill is therefore about continuity. It is not a vehicle for making changes to the regulatory framework that currently applies to business. In the longer term however, Parliament and, where appropriate, the devolved legislatures, will be able to make changes to our laws after full scrutiny and proper debate.

To maximise certainty and to aid preparation, we have published this guidance to businesses and organisations https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-businesses-on-the-repeal-bill to help explain any changes and answer some of the questions you may have.

The circular demonstrates that government negotiators are driven by what they imagine to be business interests. While these are contested from within the business community, it is clear that gender equality as a value, and the intersectionalities entailed, are not the primary consideration either of the conservative party or the opposition parties. If as Walby suggests, modernisation of gender relations by the EU and the state is employment driven,
then our focus should be on the changing interface between home and work, the position of displaced families and single parents within this environment, the regulation of labour and domestic relations, including violence, and how these construct and shape gender relations.

Feminist researchers engaged with Brexit negotiations rightly draw attention to the risk of losing this policy environment, from which equality legislation and policy is sustained and labour market regulation developed. The failure of the UK ‘Remain’ campaign to articulate the EU basis of employment benefits, social integration programmes and equality regulation and thereby better engage with working class voters and women, demonstrates the limitations of the EU as a policy environment that invites participation beyond the establishment. History demonstrates that legislation would not be in place were it not for a policy environment that supports engagement by feminist and anti-poverty activists, together with alliances struck with key actors directly engaged in government and labour market regulation - political parties, governments in power, trade unions. Yet there was very little unraveling of this background to EU legislation by Remain campaigners.

UK feminists, alongside trade unionists social movements, civil society organisations, academics and legal experts need now to turn attention to developing and resourcing independent networks for research and activism for furthering gender mainstreaming and gender equality, whilst protecting and promoting existing legislation and mechanisms for gender mainstreaming in governmental institutions and civil society.

Governmental bodies responsible for promoting gender equality in the UK have made recommendations for quality proofing Brexit negotiations. The political context is fluid, and the case for Remain continues to be made as the business case for Brexit loses credibility. Within this scenario, the case for equality continues to be sidelined, positioned as marginal to the economy. The case for feminist democracy, and for a feminized economic strategy for Brexit, is there to be made.

**Conclusion: research and activism**

Feminist research and activism has demonstrated that it is possible to develop strategies to promote equality in adverse contexts. It is through experience of these collective struggles that we continue to hold inside ourselves and be driven by the glimpse of the world we are trying to create. Neo liberal discourses may predominate, but cannot rule our capacity to imagine and strive for a better future – a feminist economy, and a democracy that is participatory, organic, and intersectional, that allows scope for equality to be enriched by the knowledge and lived experience of women in diverse communities. This participatory notion of democracy needs defending, promoting and perhaps reinventing.

It could be argued that the UK has relied so heavily on EU institutions to safeguard the furthering of gender equality, that the institutions at UK level are now found wanting, a challenge that other nations may face in the future, especially those with right wing governments, if deciding to leave the EU. Already there are calls for the furthering of the powers of Equality and Human Rights Commission and the newly established Women’s Select Committee. The latter has made a number of significant recommendations in response to consultations with women’s organisations, feminist academics, and legal experts. These include:
1. An amendment to the Equality Act 2010 to empower Parliament and the Courts to declare whether legislation is compatible with UK principles of equality, and comparable to provisions in the Human Rights Act.

2. The inclusion of a clause in the Great Repeal Bill that commits to current levels of equality protection when EU law is transposed into UK law.

3. The development of a cross-government equality strategy to ensure that all government departments take action on equality, and provide a platform for linking into civil society organisations.

More widely we need to lobby politicians to commit to gender mainstreaming at a national and devolved government level together with scrutiny across all government departments; and last but not least, ensure their commitment to civic participation in decision-making at a mayoral and local government level. Feminists MEPs and Trade Unionists active in the women's movement could be an instrumental resource. Feminist activism at a local/regional level and between the four nations may very well be the way forward in mobilising an environment for feminist democracy, working with women’s networks committed to the European project in Northern Ireland and Scotland for example, where the vote to Remain was predominant.

We have argued in this paper that good research can offer lines of inquiry that support and inform activist strategies and goals. However, although academic research funding bodies in England have prioritised Brexit as a research area, they have not up to this moment in time funded a single project focusing on its gendered impact, thus reproducing the gender sanitized discourse of Brexit negotiations and media, the myth of gender neutrality. How can this be confronted and addressed? Lines of inquiry suggested by our case studies might include:

How can a UK polity and research culture be developed that integrates gender equality into ‘democracy’? That develops the notion of ‘feminist democracy’? What alternatives can we construct through feminist alliances between the four nations of the UK, within the EU member states and beyond?

What forms of women’s activism are emerging that promote democratic forms of gender equality? How are these distinct from neo liberal and masculinist social democratic notions of equality?

Participative research led by researcher activists offers opportunities for researchers and activists - activists can usefully draw from researcher skills to critically analyse their framing of social democracy, and constructs of gender equality. Researchers can be enriched by activist knowledge embedded in lived experience. Most importantly, research has the potential to make more visible and amplify voices outside the political processes in order to strengthen political agency, and promote forms of feminist democracy that engage with those women experiencing the intersections of poverty and discrimination and who are most marginalized by inequality in the Brexit scenario.

Researchers and activists working together can engage in participatory spaces informed by the private and the public, the local, the European and the global, in collective acts of imagination and agency that move beyond the confines of established notions of democracy. We know that grassroots women’s movements can be mobilised and energised in such settings. If we could move forward in this way grass roots movements and feminist academics could be on the brink of creating an activist space for defining and furthering feminist democracy.
References


