TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?

The Female Face of Right-wing Populism and Extremism

O2

Case study on the United Kingdom and Brexit
Juliane Itta & Nicole Katsioulis

TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?
THE STUDY SERIES

All over the world, right-wing populist parties continue to grow stronger, as has been the case for a number of years – a development that is male-dominated in most countries, with right-wing populists principally elected by men. However, a new generation of women is also active in right-wing populist parties and movements – forming the female face of right-wing populism, so to speak. At the same time, these parties are rapidly closing the gap when it comes to support from female voters – a new phenomenon, for it was long believed that women tend to be rather immune to right-wing political propositions. Which gender and family policies underpin this and which societal trends play a part? Is it possible that women are coming out triumphant here?

That is a question that we already raised, admittedly playing devil's advocate, in the first volume of the publication, published in 2018 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung *Triumph of the women? The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe.* We are now continuing this first volume with a series of detailed studies published at irregular intervals. This is partly in response to the enormous interest that this collection of research has aroused to date in the general public and in professional circles. As a foundation with roots in social democracy, from the outset one of our crucial concerns has been to monitor anti-democratic tendencies and developments, while also providing information about these, with a view to strengthening an open and democratic society thanks to these insights.

The *Triumph of the women?* study series adopts a specific perspective in this undertaking: The country-specific studies examine right-wing populist (and occasionally right-wing extremist) parties and their programmes concerning family and gender policy. The analysis highlights the question of which political propositions appeal to women voters, making parties in the right-wing spectrum seem electable in their eyes. How do antifeminist positions gain ground? In addition, individual gender policy topics are examined, the percentage of votes attained by these parties is analysed and the role of female leaders and counter-movements is addressed.

While the first volume of studies focused on countries within Europe, the new study adopts a broader view and analyses individual countries and topics worldwide. Where do right-wing populist parties manage to shift the focus of discourse or even shape debates on family and gender policy, in addition to defining the terms of engagement when dealing with issues relating to flight and migration? And do their propositions concerning social policy respond to the needs of broad swathes of the electorate for greater social welfare?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is important to us that progressive stakeholders agree on these challenges and work together to combat the growing fragmentation and divisions within our societies.

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CASE STUDY ON THE UNITED KINGDOM AND BREXIT

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// The outcome of the Brexit referendum in the UK in June 2016 will have a decisive impact on the country's future development. The way in which this referendum was run and the outcome handled, exemplifies how marginal right-wing populist parties can dominate a country's political agenda without ever winning an election (Bale 2020). This paper therefore focuses on Brexit as a right-wing populist vehicle for changing a society. The following observations will include not only right-wing populist parties per se, but also the Conservative Party—also referred to as »the Tories«—, who has adopted the agenda of those parties and are now implementing it. We shall examine the question of the (potential) socio-political impact that Brexit and the political rise of its supporters will have on policy concerning women and gender equality, as well as consider the role that women play in strengthening populists or in the struggle against them.

British society has been in a state of constant polarisation since the referendum, when 52 per cent of voters decided against British EU membership. The referendum was the result of the right-wing populist, Euro-sceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP) gaining ground for years. Its successes pushed the conservative Tory Party to adopt a similar approach to such an extent that it took on almost all the populists' demands. Four years after the referendum, the mobilising power of the Brexit issue remains: in the European Parliament elections in May 2019, the Brexit Party of former UKIP leader Nigel Farage won the highest number of votes—only six weeks after its foundation.[1] In the general election on 12.12.2019, the Conservatives led by Boris Johnson succeeded in uniting the Leave vote, that is the voters who had opted for Brexit, attaining a landslide majority with the slogan »Get Brexit Done«. //

That means that defining what Brexit ultimately entails—withdrawal from the EU—falls to a party which, since the referendum, has increasingly aligned itself with the ideologies of right-wing populist parties in the EU. Women's rights or equal opportunities played virtually no role in the debate on leaving the EU, which was instead dominated by issues such as immigration, sovereignty and the economy. As a result, a vision was propagated of a Britain separate from the EU, with a trade policy modelled on the USA, deregulated markets and free ports, in short: tax havens. The risk, however, is that women must fear losing the equal opportunities and anti-discrimination rights that to date have been guaranteed by EU legislation. At the same time, it is clear that the economic downturn triggered by coronavirus and Brexit will in many ways affect women more than men. Brexit is, therefore, not just an abstract question of EU membership but has the potential to change British society along the lines desired by its right-wing populist inventors, both in the political realm and beyond.

1: Brexit, Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities

Since the general election on 12.12.2019, it has been clear that Prime Minister Boris Johnson is steering the country towards a hard Brexit. This means the government's negotiating stance prioritises the United Kingdom's political and economic independence over a close partnership with the EU, and even envisages a no-deal scenario. Rather than being a historical coincidence, this development arises with the Conservative Party having increasingly embraced UKIP's Brexit agenda and its right-wing populist perspective over the past decade. The backstory in this respect dates from the 1990s, when UKIP began calling for a referendum on British EU membership. The Conservative Party came under increasing pressure as UKIP's influence grew, winning over voters mainly from Tory constituencies in southern England and from the Labour Party in the north of England and Wales. Ironically, the main reason that UKIP gained traction was that it could win seats in the European Parliament elections, which it was unable to do within the British first-past-the-post voting system.

Farage's party utilised scepticism about the EU as the most visible element of a programme characterised by anti-immigration sentiment, hatred of elites and emotionalisation, as well as opposition to »political correctness«. This enabled it to make gains both among the economically better-off, older Conservative voters, and among the poorer working-class Labour supporters. However, the effect on the two major parties differed, with a more pronounced impact on the Conservatives. Although EU membership had been a controversial issue for the Tories for decades, no party leader dared to make it a decisive issue. The successes of UKIP and anti-EU campaigns by the right-wing press made it increasingly difficult for the Conservatives to sustain this ambivalent attitude. For this reason, in 2013 Cameron, then Conservative Prime Minister, promised a referendum if it proved impossible to reform the EU in line with British ideas by 2017. He hoped primarily to make peace between the factions in his party, partly because he did not expect to find himself in a situation where he would have to keep his promise.[2] However, after Cameron's landslide victory in the 2015 elections, he could no longer wriggle out of this position. After intensive negotiations with the EU, in which the British demanded, inter alia, stricter immigration rules for EU citizens and a right of veto against proposed EU legislation, in February 2016 Cameron managed to persuade the EU to make certain concessions. However, these negotiations were seen as a failure by Leave supporters, first and foremost Nigel Farage and his UKIP party, but also by Boris Johnson, at the time an MP and Mayor of London. In order to end the power struggle within the Conservatives and be done with the issue of withdrawal from the EU, Cameron called a referendum in June 2016, in which the British would vote on EU membership. Contrary not only to the Prime Minister's expectations but also to forecasts based on opinion polls, 51.9 per cent of voters opted to leave the EU. The catch with regard to the referendum was that it remained unclear what the withdrawal from and the future relation with the EU would look like exactly, a fact that only became really evident after the

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[1] The British first-past-the-post voting system makes it difficult for smaller or new parties that do not have a regionally concentrated electorate to win a constituency and establish themselves in the British party landscape. As a result, no extreme right-wing party has yet succeeded in winning a significant number of seats in the British parliament. Although the Brexit supporters of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) became the third strongest force in the 2015 general election with 12.5 per cent of the vote, they won only one seat in the first-past-the-post system. For marginal parties, elections to the European Parliament were therefore the best chance to convert their shares of the vote into parliamentary seats. In the 2014 European elections, UKIP became the strongest force in the UK and won 24 of the 73 British seats. However, since the party's clear radicalisation under the leadership of Gerard Batten, its mainstream influence has greatly diminished. It was not able to mobilise voters in either the local elections or the 2019 European Parliament elections—UKIP was replaced in its role as the leading anti-establishment and anti-EU force in 2019 by the Brexit Party, newly founded in April of the same year, which enjoyed significant gains in the most recent European Parliament elections in 2019.

[2] In 2013, Cameron was in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and expected this to continue after 2015. As the Liberal Democrats would have never agreed to such a referendum, he would have been released from his promise.

vote. The toxic mix that came together under the guise of the Brexit campaign embraces a right-wing populist agenda in its purest form (Iakhnis, Rathbun, Reifler, Scotto 2018). Firstly, it consists of a good amount of nationalism and nativism; the well-being of one's own country is put before that of others. It also suggests that national solutions are better and cheaper than participating in international bodies. The Leave campaign cunningly concealed its nationalist leanings under the term »sovereignty«, used as a justification for almost all of the Brexiteers' demands. Secondly, Brexit encompasses profound hostility to the elite and a dichotomisation between the people and the Establishment, be it in Brussels or London. Michael Gove used this as an example when he dismissed factual arguments put forward by academics with the remark that »people have had enough of experts« (Portes 2017). Thirdly, profoundly xenophobic rhetoric was disseminated under the Brexit mantle, manifested not least in the shameful poster depicting refugees on the Hungarian border (Stewart, Mason 2016). Interestingly, post-referendum surveys have indicated that other motives played a role in the Leave vote. When asked about negative influences, more than three-quarters of Leave voters stated multiculturalism and social liberalism, while 74 per cent of those surveyed mentioned feminism (Ashcroft 2019).

The shortcomings in defining what Brexit would mean exactly, coupled with the victory of the Leave vote in the referendum, gave populist politicians like Farage and Johnson a blank cheque to push through their own agendas. After all, the guardians of Brexit could proclaim that any attempt to devise an alternative format for withdrawal from the EU, for example emulating the kind of close ties enjoyed by Norway or Switzerland, would constitute betrayal. Prime Minister Theresa May's attempts to negotiate a withdrawal agreement also fell flat. Her meaningless slogan »Brexit means Brexit« led to her downfall, for the initiators of Brexit always found a way to claim that only they could define Brexit—in particular by the spin they put on inherent hostility towards the elite. This constitutes a major threat for British society in years to come.

Female Voters and Brexit

In the referendum, 55 per cent of men and 49 per cent of women voted for the withdrawal from the EU. In other words, 51 per cent of female voters opted to stay in the EU, while men, albeit by a narrow majority, voted to leave. Although voting behaviour did not differ significantly in gender terms, the gender dimension is relevant to understand the populist polarisation of British society and Brexit's significance and consequences.

Why did 49 per cent of women vote for Brexit? After all, leaving the EU has potentially negative consequences for women and their rights (see below). Various narratives have been established in the search for the causes of the Brexit vote: Brexit as a counter-reaction to austerity policies; Brexit as a revolt of the working class against the Establishment; Brexit as a xenophobically motivated, nostalgic trope of longing for the bygone days of the erstwhile British Empire (Hozić, True 2017). All these narratives have some degree of explanatory power for the choices made by voters.

What, however, can be said specifically about female voters in the referendum? The supporters of the Leave campaign used the famous slogan »We send the EU £350 million a week – let's fund our NHS instead« (Vote Leave 2016). The UK's public health system, the NHS (National Health Service), is an iconic post-war achievement that enjoys broad societal support. Better funding of the service was a compelling argument at the time for many women who view the NHS as a priority for themselves and their families, or who are employed by the NHS. This becomes all the more plausible given the disproportionate impact of government cuts on women.

Moreover, issues traditionally considered important by women hardly played a role in the referendum campaign, just as women scarcely appeared in the campaign, either as experts or as stakeholders. A study by Loughborough University found that men were responsible for 85 per cent of the press coverage and 70 per cent of the television coverage over the six weeks of the campaign. The discourse was almost exclusively led and dominated by a small circle of the male-dominated British elite. These men, like David Cameron, then Prime Minister, or Boris Johnson, then

Mayor of London, having been socialised in the same closed circles of elite private schools and university debating clubs, were now pursuing their party-political rivalries on the national stage. This monopolisation of debate ignored the voices of women and people from other walks of life and brought complex issues together under the rhetoric of a »hard Brexit«. Hozić and True (2017) therefore describe Brexit as the product of a »gendered intra-elite conflict« (p. 267) and as being deliberately triggered as a scandal, fuelled by the personal rivalry between David Cameron and Boris Johnson, in order to divert attention away from structural problems in the UK.[3]

It is not simply that women were scarcely represented as protagonists: Brexit's impact on them was hardly discussed. Gender researchers have also criticised the narrow focus of both the Leave and Remain campaigns, which were limited to topics with what is dubbed a high political profile— migration, foreign policy and trade. Issues such as gender, equal opportunities and social justice were left out of the referendum (Shorrocks, Fowler 2019). Under-representation of these issues explains, inter alia, the lack of awareness, at the time of the vote in June 2016, of the risks and implications for maternity protection, parental leave, rights of part-time workers, etc.

This also explains why there were only slight differences in men's and women's voting behaviour in 2016 in the binary choice between Leave and Remain. Clearer differences emerge when it comes to support for the political parties and actors behind Brexit. In national and European elections, significantly more men than women voted for UKIP or the Brexit Party. In a survey conducted by the polling institute YouGov before the 2019 European Parliament elections, 26 per cent—and thus the majority—of the men surveyed said they intended to vote for Nigel Farage's Brexit Party. Had it been up to the female voters, Farage's party would have been relegated to fourth place behind the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberals.

[3] Former Prime Minister Tony Blair (Labour, 1997–2007) cited slow economic growth, lack of investment, low savings rates and stagnating incomes as structural problems in 2017, as well as the country's division between young and old, urban and rural, those who are better off or worse off. See: https://www.businessinsider.de/wirtschaft/tony-blair-der-brexit-ist-eine-massive-ablenkung-2017-7/ (last accessed on 10.10.2020). The idea of Brexit as an »iatrogenic disease« is also developed by Lewis Baston (2018).

One reason could be that the withdrawal from the EU was a less crucial topic for women in elections. Women were less interested in the UK's relationship with the EU and also voted less frequently for new or small parties such as UKIP or other extreme right-wing fringe parties, such as the British National Party (Campbell 2012). Surveys from 2019 also show that women are less likely to support extreme variants of Brexit such as a no-deal Brexit and are now more in favour of remaining in the EU than at the time of the referendum (YouGov 2019).

Brexit— A Retrograde Step for Women's Rights and Gender Equality?

Leaving the EU is such a problematic issue from a progressive point of view because it provides a window of opportunity to undermine long-established rights and certainties. The following rights are particularly affected:

- Equal pay for equal work
- Equal opportunities and equal treatment in the workplace
- Combating all forms of discrimination (European Parliament 2019).

In all these areas, the EU has adopted directives that must be transposed into national legislation by the Member States. The principle of »equal pay for equal work« is even enshrined in the EU treaties. EU directives, for example on maternity protection (Council Directive 1992), establish minimum standards that each Member State must guarantee. In the UK, EU membership has acted both as a guarantor of minimum standards and as a brake on national tendencies towards deregulation. In the event of a hard Brexit, meaning without any dynamic link to new EU standards, the risk in the long term is that Great Britain—which will be dependent on the interests of the party in government at any particular time— will fall below EU standards (Cowburn 2017). Numerous previous examples of British resistance to furthering development of European equality policy provide justification for such concerns: When the Maternity Protection Directive was introduced in 1992, the original proposal was watered down in response to British criticism. After years of

negotiations, the proposed recast of the Maternity Protection Directive in 2008, in which the Commission called, inter alia, for an extension of the maternity protection periods, had to be withdrawn, having met with mainly British (and German) resistance in the Council of the EU. British critiques of the proposal stemmed partly from the additional financial burden it would place on employers (Guerrina, Murphy 2016).

While EU law has been transposed into British legislation and will therefore initially continue to apply after UK withdrawal, future governments will be able to amend these laws. The question of whether standards for workers will continue to apply, be constrained or extended will depend on the plans of whichever party is in power. Since the last election, the Tories have held the largest Conservative majority since the 1980s, giving them a free hand in these matters for the next few years. This is a cause for concern: advocates for making a clean cut in relations with the EU are no longer confined to UKIP or the Brexit Party, which can clearly be classified as right-wing populist parties. These views have also gained the upper hand among the Conservative Party, now governing with an absolute majority. Boris Johnson's election as party leader and his victory in 2019 make this abundantly clear.[4]

Economists also assume that Brexit could further exacerbate austerity policy in Great Britain in coming years. This is worrying, as women are particularly affected by these austerity measures. For example, since 2010, austerity policy has led to a dramatic deterioration in living standards for single parents (90 per cent of whom are women) and unmarried pensioners, with women bearing 86 per cent of the cost of the austerity measures (Honeyball, Manzur 2019). Women are increasingly affected by austerity policy as they are the main recipients of social security benefits, represent the majority of the public-sector workforce and perform a large proportion of unpaid care and child-rearing work. These sectors are particularly affected by government austerity measures.

[4]   Johnson has not simply caused controversy through his transformation from liberal mayor of London to prominent chief Brexiteer, he has been criticised on several occasions for his sexist and racist remarks. The accusation of sexual harassment of a journalist, vociferous arguments with his partner which led to a police operation, and his comparison of female burqa wearers with »postboxes« and »bank robbers« are just a few examples.

Women in Britain are already bearing the brunt of the coronavirus crisis' impact, yet this does not appear to be a central concern for the Conservative government (Hupkau 2020).

2. The Brexiteer Stance on Gender Politics

Against the backdrop of the real-world changes brought about by Brexit and the way in which right-wing populist views have seeped into the Tories' programme in the course of this process, it is also important to consider the approach pursued by these parties when it comes to equal opportunities policy, discrimination, LGBTI rights, and other social issues. This offers scope to foresee the extent to which women's fears around Brexit may prove well-founded.

Family and Equal Opportunities Policy

While equal opportunities issues are scarcely mentioned in UKIP's programme, it does include some positions on family policy. Under the heading »Caring for young children, supporting families«, the 2017 UKIP Manifesto, for example, declares affordable childcare for ordinary families to be a priority for the party. Affordable childcare is essential to enable women to return to work. In its 2019 election manifesto, however, the party clearly states which family model it considers worth supporting: »Stable, active and intact two-parent families are the bedrock of a robust society, whereas broken families are much more likely to be dependent on the state and have poorer physical and mental health and contribute less to wider society« (UKIP Manifesto 2019).

Women's rights play no part within the UKIP programme although a rhetorical topos that instrumentalises the rights of (local) women as an argument against migrants can often be identified. UKIP Chair Farage, for example, described migrants as posing a threat to British women if the country were to remain in the EU, deftly blending xenophobic and seemingly liberal positions (Ross 2016). The events of New Year's Eve 2015 on the square in front of Cologne Cathedral served as the backdrop to his depictions (Pearson 2016).

The Brexit Party did not publish an election manifesto addressing detailed policy issues but simply called for reforms to the country's political system as well as a »clean-break Brexit«. In addition, in the run-up to the 2019 elections, it published a list of political goals that were to constitute the party's core concepts. There is no mention at all of any policy on families or equal opportunities. Attention for this area of concern was attracted, above all, due to extreme statements made by individual party representatives. James Bartholomew, a Brexit Party candidate in the 2019 European Parliament elections, for example, considers the institution of the family to be threatened by women's growing status. He has previously called for all state support for single women to be abolished (Walker 2019c). This kind of »familism« is the hallmark of a retrogressive, conservative ideology of the family that assigns clear roles to women and men, yet de facto excludes anyone who does not belong to a family, thus categorising women as beings without any rights (Notz 2015).

The Tories, on the other hand, are divided on equal opportunities and family policy matters. Two factions can be identified: the modernisers, who represent liberal social positions on equal opportunities and advocate a partnership-based division of domestic and family work, and the traditionalists, who advocate a traditional vision of the family. During Cameron's time as Prime Minister (2010-2016), the modernisers clearly gained influence. In the manifesto for the 2019 general election, the party's campaign pledges included one billion pounds for more and better childcare, improved financial support for people, especially women, who perform unpaid care and child-rearing work, and measures to help women and men to combine work and family life (Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019).

In contrast, the current cabinet line-up of Boris Johnson, who can be numbered among the liberal modernisers, includes traditionalists like Rees-Mogg, Leader of the House of Commons, as well as modernisers, such as Liz Truss, Minister for Women and Equalities. Johnson's time in office has to date been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, no policy strategy on gender and equal opportunities policy has yet been determined. Although the election manifesto announced that the party's objectives include reducing

inequalities between men and women, the focus was, however, more on reviews and discussions than on tangible measures (Annesley, Gains, Sanders 2019). However, the new Prime Minister's personnel policy was severely criticised from an equal opportunities perspective: only five of the 21 ministers in his cabinet are women (Government Digital Service). In addition, during the coronavirus crisis, the groundwork for the most important decisions has been done in a smaller circle within the cabinet, with key roles assigned exclusively to male ministers.

Reproductive Rights

Abortion law in the UK is fairly liberal and no national party calls this into question. Since 1967, abortions have been possible in the UK until the 24th week of pregnancy and in exceptional cases even after that point. However, these provisions only applied in England, Wales and Scotland: in Northern Ireland, abortion was illegal in almost all circumstances, even in cases of rape or incest.

It was not until 2019— under Johnson's leadership— that the British parliament (due to the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly) passed an amendment to the comprehensive Northern Ireland Bill, reforming Northern Ireland's strict abortion laws and decriminalising abortion.[5] To date, these reforms have met with strong opposition on the part of fundamentalist Protestants and representatives of the Catholic Church. Their views were expressed in Parliament through the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland, a conservative unionist Protestant party. It had supported the Conservative government from 2017 to 2019 and was able to delay the intervention from London by two years. Nevertheless, the bill passed the House of Commons by a large majority, with 99 MPs voting against it, with almost exclusively DUP or Tory MPs amongst those opposing the bill (except for seven votes from Labour and the Scottish National Party).

There are certainly declared anti-abortionists in the Tory party: Jacob Rees-Mogg, an openly Catholic MP known for his extremely conservative views, who has

[5]   The Northern Ireland Assembly was created based on the Good Friday Agreement and was suspended from 2017 to 2020 due to intractable disputes between the parties.

attracted particular attention in recent years as a convinced Brexiteer, believes that abortion is not morally justifiable under any circumstances, not even in cases of rape (BBC News 2017). Under Prime Minister Johnson, Rees-Mogg was promoted to the position of Leader of the House of Commons and thus plays a central role in the current government. He is a good example of how previously marginalised MPs have been propelled into the heart of government by Brexit. However, he has not yet been able to find support for his socio-political views there.

LGBTI Rights

Same-sex marriage was legalised in England and Wales in 2013 and in Scotland in 2014, with Northern Ireland being the exception until 2019. Acceptance of same-sex relationships in British society has steadily increased over recent years. However, a recently published study shows declining acceptance for the first time in 30 years. The authors of the study interpret this as a possible stagnation after years of liberalisation of social values (Booth 2019). The Brexit Party and UKIP, as well as the Tory Party, have politicians in their ranks who have publicly expressed their unease about equal rights for the LGBTI community. Within the Tories, Jacob Rees-Mogg in particular has spoken out against same-sex marriage on religious grounds. In 2018, UKIP, as part of the party's radicalisation, appointed a new spokesperson for family policy, who, inter alia, denigrated LGBTI activists as »gaystapo«. LGBTI issues have recently received a great deal of media attention after enormous protests at a school in Birmingham, in particular by Muslim parents, against inclusion of these issues when teaching tolerance as part of the school curriculum. Former Tory leaders such as Andrea Leadsom and Esther McVey supported the protests, arguing that parents should be able to decide for themselves what their children learn. Under the guise of parental self-determination, these female politicians thus reject the diversity of family lifestyles and support displacement of the topic from public discourse into the private sphere.

When it comes to recognising gender self-determination, Johnson's government has incorporated its internal contradictions into the Gender Recognition Act. Debate on this Act was publicly launched in 2018

and was followed, in September 2020, by a bill on the issue drafted by the Minister for Equalities, Liz Truss. However, it was criticised by many trans groups as a rather piecemeal effort. Criticism has focused on the fact that only minimal adaptations have been made to what has to date been a humiliating and lengthy procedure to change the gender indicated on one's birth certificate. Moreover, there is no sign of any government initiative to address the 85 per cent rise in violence against trans people (Heynes 2020).

Hate Crimes and Movements
Opposed to The Concept of Gender

A similar picture emerges with regard to positions opposed to the concept of gender. While these are not anchored in any party manifesto, individual statements by candidates make it clear that UKIP and the Brexit Party in particular harbour such right-wing populist stances. One of UKIP's candidates for the 2019 European Parliament elections, Carl Benjamin, argued that feminism is a disease of modernity and has produced a generation of men who no longer know how to behave because they have been demonised. His misogyny also became apparent on Twitter, where he told Labour MP Jess Phillips: »I wouldn't even rape you«. In connection with the murder of six women in California, he argued that only »stupid social justice feminist bullshit« was responsible for the murders. After Benjamin's tweet, MP Jess Phillips received several hundred rape threats (Walker 2019b).

Overall, however, movements opposed to the concept of gender have little political backing in the UK. There has, nonetheless, been a widespread increase in hate crimes since the Brexit referendum (McRobbie 2018). It should also be emphasised that female parliamentarians within the Conservative Party who, like Anna Soubry, opposed Brexit received so many threats of violence that police protection was required. Brexit has thus caused a breach in the dam holding back violence.

The anti-racism campaign Hope Not Hate describes in its State of Hate 2019 report (Collins et al. 2019) how extreme right-wing narratives, highly emotionalised messages, conspiracy theories and hate speech are increasingly crossing over into the mainstream. One gender-specific consequence of this is the growing

tendency in the UK in recent years for women politicians in particular to experience verbal threats and insults, both online and offline (Dhrodia 2019).

During the referendum campaign, clear demonstrations emerged of the real threat posed by individual perpetrators from extreme right-wing circles. In June 2016, Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered in the middle of the street in her own constituency; the perpetrator had demonstrable connections to the extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi scene. At his hearing, he called for »Death to the traitors, freedom for Britain« and had already shouted »Britain first« during the crime. Data from the Home Office show that hate crimes in England and Wales increased by 17 per cent in 2017/18 compared to the previous year; 76 per cent of these crimes were racially motivated. In particular, a spike in hate crimes was recorded immediately after the 2016 referendum and the 2017 terrorist attacks.

Summary
The EU, anti-Establishment sentiment, and immigration were the main issues on the political agenda for the right-wing populist forces pushing for Brexit. Although both UKIP and the Brexit Party regularly used topoi that were misogynist and hostile to the concept of gender, these ideas were not at the heart of their agendas. The Conservative Party, in plagiarising the core Brexit-related issues, does not seem to have moved in a similar socio-political direction so far. There are reasons to fear, however, that the party's anti-European sentiment may mean that equal opportunities policy safeguarded by EU membership might now fall victim to anti-European furore.

3. Women's Voting Behaviour
In the last European elections (2014 and 2019), Leave supporters in UKIP and the Brexit Party celebrated considerable successes; the extent to which they will have an opportunity to influence political debate in the UK without access to further European Parliament elections is now questionable. UKIP won the highest number of seats of any UK party in the 2014 European Parliament elections with over 26 per cent of the vote, and five years later the newly formed Brexit Party became the strongest force among UK MEPs with
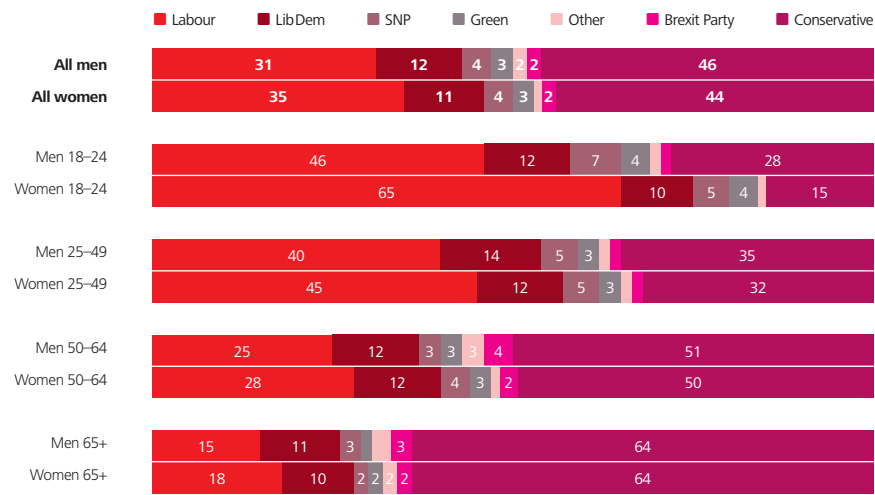
31.6 per cent of votes in the UK. A year before the Brexit referendum, in the 2015 general election, UKIP won a remarkable 12.4 per cent of votes nationally. The populists' success at the national level, however, was a one-off and translated into only one seat in parliament due to the British first-past-the-post voting system. In the 2010, 2017 and 2019 general elections, UKIP notched up only 3.1 per cent, 1.8 per cent and less than 0.1 per cent of the vote respectively. UKIP has therefore ceased to be a relevant political force since at least the European Parliament elections in 2019. The party has become highly radicalised and openly Islamophobic since 2018; the newly founded Brexit Party has replaced UKIP in the role of »Brexit watchdog«, demanding the toughest possible implementation of the referendum. What role do women's votes play in the success of these parties?

Which Parties Attract Votes
from British Women?
Although historically British women have tended to vote conservatively, a distinction has emerged in the female electorate in recent years: Young women are more likely to vote for the Labour Party, while older women continue to vote more for the Conservative Party; the situation is similar for men. → **Figure I** illustrates this trend and also shows that, on average, the extreme Brexit parties are more attractive to men, especially older men, than to women. Possible explanations can be found in female voters' political preferences with regard to public spending, the European Union, and newly founded parties.

At the same time, there is a persistent gap between men and women when it comes to voting intentions for UKIP, as shown in → **Figure II** by the UK's most comprehensive database of surveys and election results, the British Election Study, even though the data sample only covers 2014/2015.

FIGURE I | **Vote by Age and Gender**
% of 41.995 adults who voted at the 2019 general election

Legend: ■ Labour ■ LibDem ■ SNP ■ Green ■ Other ■ Brexit Party ■ Conservative

All men: 31 | 12 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 46
All women: 35 | 11 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 44

Men 18–24: 46 | 12 | 7 | 4 | 28
Women 18–24: 65 | 10 | 5 | 4 | 15

Men 25–49: 40 | 14 | 5 | 3 | 35
Women 25–49: 45 | 12 | 5 | 3 | 32

Men 50–64: 25 | 12 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 51
Women 50–64: 28 | 12 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 50

Men 65+: 15 | 11 | 3 | 3 | 64
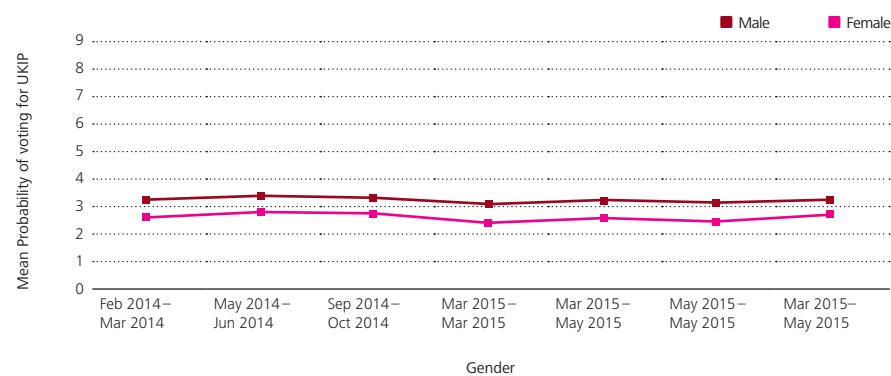Women 65+: 18 | 10 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 64

Source: YouGov https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election (last accessed on 22.11.2020)

Female Voters and Right-wing Populist Parties

In interviews with female UKIP supporters in 2013 and 2014, respondents said that British women had already achieved so much in terms of gender equality that parties no longer needed to address feminist issues. On the other hand, respondents appeared very concerned about the rights of Muslim women. However, Erin Sanders-McDonagh (2019) demonstrates that this constitutes only an apparent interest in women's rights. Finally, respondents did not express any concern about figures indicating that 20 per cent of British women experience sexual assault in their lives, about the growing encroachments on women's reproductive rights in the UK and that, on average, two women a week are killed by violent partners. On the contrary, the line of argument put forward tended to shed light on the anti-Islamic, anti-migrant attitude of survey respondents. These women voters, apparently also draw on topoi from equal opportunities policy in seeking to legitimise their xenophobia.

FIGURE II | **Probability of voting for UKIP vs Gender**

Legend: ■ Male ■ Female

Y-axis: Mean Probability of voting for UKIP (0–9)
X-axis (Gender): Feb 2014–Mar 2014 | May 2014–Jun 2014 | Sep 2014–Oct 2014 | Mar 2015–Mar 2015 | Mar 2015–May 2015 | May 2015–May 2015 | Mar 2015–May 2015

Source: British Election Study, Data Playground: https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-playground/?action=new#page-title (last accessed on 22.11.2020)

4. Women as Protagonists in Right-wing Populist Parties or Movements

There are *no* women in leading positions in right-wing populist parties in the UK, in contrast to France and Germany. Although Catherine Blaiklock founded the Brexit Party in 2019 and was its first Chairwoman, she was forced to resign from this role after only two months when her anti-Islamic and racist remarks were posted on Twitter (Walker 2019a). Since then, the Brexit Party has been led by its most prominent member, Nigel Farage. As he had been the party's mentor from the outset, Blaiklock attracted little public notice.

UKIP also was and remains a male-dominated party. Despite being briefly led by Patricia Mountain from November 2019 to April 2020, the influential positions in the party are traditionally held by men, as is also currently the case. There are six male representatives and only one female representative in the party leadership. Of 22 other key positions, only six are held by women (UKIP).

The Brexit campaign was also largely dominated by men, as mentioned above. One important exception is Gisela Stuart. However, she differs from Conservative Brexit representatives, as she supports Brexit for left-wing reasons. Gisela Stuart is a German former bookseller who, as a Labour MP from 1997 to 2007, became one of the most important representatives of the Labour Party's EU-critical faction. Before the 2016 referendum, she headed the Vote Leave campaign together with Michael Gove and Boris Johnson. She was the only Labour MP involved in this campaign. She thus became Labour's best-known Brexit supporter. Her main argument for Brexit was that Britain would do better to redirect its financial contribution to the EU into the National Health Service (NHS) and that the country could not provide state-funded healthcare services for more immigrants. She thus lent additional legitimacy to the slogan on financing the NHS.

Aside from Gisela Stuart, other women, albeit from Conservative ranks, have contributed to the success of Brexit. They made a major contribution to Tory adoption of certain elements of the right-wing populist Brexit narrative. However, most did not make a public appearance until after the 2016 referendum. The most prominent is Theresa May, formerly Prime Minister (2016–2019). As Home Secretary, she had already attempted to raise the Conservatives' profile in this area with a tough immigration policy from 2010 onwards. She was notorious for the Go Home campaign she initiated, involving vans that drove around London districts with many migrant residents on behalf of the Home Office (Elgot 2018).

She attempted a similar tactic of emulating others' positions when it came to Brexit. Although she campaigned on the Remain side in the 2016 referendum, after taking office in 2016 she sided with the ultra-Brexiteers[6] because she believed that this was the only way to hold her party together. Among the many motives for Brexit, she identified the xenophobic mood in the country as the principal driving force—the point on which she had the most credibility—and thus further fuelled her party's populist wing. May called for border controls and an end to free movement of workers and pledged at an early stage to withdraw from the Single Market. Theresa May was instrumental in transporting nationalist slogans from the right of the Conservative Party to the heart of the Brexit debate. However, all the concessions she made did not go far enough for the Brexiteers, which meant she was forced to resign after her proposed withdrawal agreement was rejected by Parliament. Her successor as Home Secretary, Priti Patel, who had been involved in the Leave campaign with Johnson and Stuart, is now continuing the policy of a »hostile environment« for immigrants.

All in all, a broad spectrum of views can be found amongst proponents of Brexit, some of whom have very different positions and approaches. In September 2019, however, an analysis by Mary Honeyball and Hannah Manzur indicated that even if women did have an influence in the debate on Brexit, any power they held was merely temporary and uncertain, as in the case of Theresa May, for example, and women's role was assessed by how well they could »overcome« the political impact of the Brexit referendum. Under-representation of women in the process leading up to Brexit is even more apparent. For example, Brexit ministers, negotiators and other influential figures have almost exclusively been male since May's

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6 Ultra-Brexiteers are those who advocate complete disengagement from the EU and do not want to negotiate follow-up agreements with the EU, but demand a clean break, also described as a ›hard Brexit‹.

resignation. The proportion of women in these groups and positions has varied between zero and 25 per cent, thus falling significantly short of the level of female representation in the national parliament.

5. Counter-strategies

Women's Resistance to Brexit and Right-wing Populism

Broad-based social counter-movements resisting Brexit and the right-wing do exist in the United Kingdom, but the 2019 election took the wind out of their sails, particularly in the case of the anti-Brexit movement.

On a number of occasions, several million people took to the streets to demonstrate against Brexit, especially in London. On the whole, several different parties were involved: the Liberal Democrats (BBC News 2019a), the SNP (Edington 2019), the Greens, the Change UK Party, some parts of the Labour Party, along with groups such as Best for Britain, Britain for Europe and Women for a People's Vote, as well as celebrities from the world of culture, such as popular singers or radio presenters. Many citizens from other EU countries took part in the demonstrations, seeking to draw attention to the ways in which their rights in the United Kingdom are threatened by Brexit. Several action groups that participated called for a second referendum or a popular vote on the Brexit agreement. They all shared a profound aversion to Brexit and urged the country not to close itself off to immigrants.

Two large women's movements, Women for a People's Vote and Bitches Against Brexit were among the demonstrators. Women for a People's Vote, founded in September 2018, is the larger of the two and insists that women must have a right to shape their own future and influence the Brexit process. Specifically, the movement called for a referendum on a Brexit agreement. Bitches Against Brexit was a slightly smaller women's group than Women for a People's Vote;[7] created as a

reaction to the Conservative Ladies for Leave campaign, it did, however, boast a significantly larger number of Twitter followers (14,500) than Ladies for Leave. The group produced t-shirts, made films and organised events. Actress Emma Kennedy founded this movement accidentally (Evening Standard 2019) when she first used the phrase Bitches Against Brexit on social media. In the light of the mass reactions her post provoked, a website was rapidly set up. The campaign followed on from the People's Vote demonstration in March 2019. The People's Vote campaign, launched in April 2018, called for a second referendum. The movement announced after Johnson's election victory in December 2019 that it would reorganise and reposition itself in 2020 to advocate a fair Brexit deal. The campaign has since gone quiet, probably also due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is also a feminist party in Britain that condemns Brexit: The Women's Equality Party (Hinsliff 2018) is currently not represented in the House of Commons. It was founded in 2015 by the journalist and popular television presenter Sandi Toksvig. The party is currently chaired by the feminist Mandu Reid, previously a campaigner for women's rights, who also founded a charity for this purpose. Although the party has gradually grown, it plays only a marginal role in the British party and media landscape. Its political demands encompass ending discrimination against women, the right to abortion throughout the country and adequate representation of women in political office. In the 2019 general election, the party supported Liberal Democrat candidates in two constituencies as they competed against former MPs who had hit the headlines for sexual harassment.

Gender-related arguments as to why all the afore-mentioned organisations are fighting either for a second referendum or against Brexit are as follows:

a.) The Brexit debate was dominated by men from the outset. Before the 2016 referendum, 74.5 per cent of coverage on television and 84.4 per cent of that in the print media was male-dominated. The British government apparently only sent one woman to Brussels in the Brexit negotiating team and 62 per cent of the employees in the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU/also known as the Brexit Department) were male. Even in the

parliamentary debate on the Brexit agreement, 90 per cent of the speaking time was taken up by men, although 32 per cent of MPs were women.

b.) Brexit is associated with financial losses for women. For example, by November 2019 the UK Treasury had already had to provide almost five billion euros for Brexit-related costs, while growth in the British economy has slowed since the Leave vote (Leitel, Riedel 2019). The aforementioned organisations argue that this primarily affects women, also due to the austerity policy in force since 2010, inflation, and falling wages.

c.) Male protagonists have proven deceitful or ignorant in Brexit debates. The reference here is to the lies, hollow promises, and general ignorance displayed by Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and other advocates of Brexit, for example the prominent slogan on NHS finances that turned out to be factually false (The Independent 2018).

Other Initiatives and Campaigns against Right-wing Populism

NGOs that campaign specifically against xenophobia and for tolerance have also organised campaigns against right-wing populist parties and Brexit. The Hope not Hate campaign, for example, was founded in 2004 as a positive voice of resistance to the hate campaigns of extreme right-wing parties, such as the British National Party (BNP). It aims to educate voters and to contribute, through anti-fascist activities, to ensuring extreme right-wing parties are no longer represented on any town councils. The group distributes educational leaflets in regions where the right is strong and it is supported by academics, as well as celebrities such as comedian Eddie Izzard and former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown. It is one of the UK's largest and most successful political action groups against right-wing movements.

In addition, several initiatives explore the causes that have led to the rise of right-wing populism and attempt to look forward, with a view to overcoming political divisions in society. One example is the Centre for Towns, a non-partisan organisation that campaigns for the interests of citizens in small and medium-sized towns in the UK. It generally focuses on neglected regions. Ian Warren, the campaign's founder and

leader, has analysed the economic problems these towns and cities face and how this has fostered the rise of right-wing populism. He noted that fairer social and economic policy is essential to fight the causes of Brexit and adopted this point as the main demand put forward by the initiative.

Trade unions also play an important role in the fight against right-wing populism. However, British trade unions face an adverse political and social environment, making their influence very limited. The attacks on workers' representatives, which began under Thatcher, have left deep scars on the economy and society to this day. Trade union membership has, however, grown in recent years, as many women have joined; the heightened visibility of trade unions in the current COVID-19 crisis should lead to greater trade union influence. The General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has noted that fear often lies at the root of right-wing populism, explaining that frustration and fear also arise due to precarious working conditions, low wages and austerity policies, as well as people feeling left behind as developments forge ahead, all of which encourages populism. In addition to expressing demands to politicians in the light of this situation, the trade unions are also committed to providing tangible assistance and guidance to members. In 2008, for example, the TUC published and distributed a brochure on how to deal with fascism and right-wing populism in the workplace. The aim is to prevent the threat of right-wing extremists gaining influence among workers and trade unionists. The brochure not only points out the threat of fascism, but also gives specific recommendations for action to counteract this (Trades Union Congress 2008). In 2016, the TUC also launched a project to document cases of racism and xenophobia in the workplace, thereby drawing attention to the issue. There are also a number of regional programmes and online tools to train trade unionists (or other interested parties) in arguing against right-wing populists, and to help in developing campaigns (Trades Union Congress).

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7 The campaign was initiated by the prominent Conservative Brexit advocate Esther McVey in February 2019 and is intended to provide a platform for women who support Brexit. The campaign adopts feminist discourse and criticises the lack of female representation in the Brexit process, but does not really advocate women's rights. In the meantime, the campaign has come to a standstill and is no longer attracting media attention.

Conclusion

The Brexit process to date has fundamentally changed the political situation in the United Kingdom. Although it has not led directly to a deterioration in women's situation, equal opportunities rights are under threat. The entire pro-Brexit process, both in terms of campaigns and post-referendum negotiations, is a male domain. Apart from a handful of exceptions, women have played almost no part in this context. The meaning of the term has been defined almost exclusively by men. This gender gap was also previously evident in the two right-wing populist parties, UKIP and the Brexit Party. Women played almost no active role at all within these parties and the few female candidates, who did stand in elections, received significantly fewer votes than their male counterparts.

In the run-up to the referendum and during the turbulent phase of the negotiations, the Conservative Party took on board a number of key right-wing populist elements associated with Brexit, adopting these from the two small parties UKIP and the Brexit Party and completely side-lining those smaller parties, also with the help of the electoral system. The Conservatives are thus now hostage to an agenda of scepticism about immigration, xenophobia, anti-Establishment positions and nationalism.

However, since Brexit has become inevitable, that is since the elections in December 2019, there is no evidence that the Tories are actively pursuing a policy aimed at reversing equal opportunities improvements achieved to date or imposing positions hostile to the concept of gender. Nevertheless, there is a risk of erosion of women's rights previously safeguarded by the EU, whether with regard to maternity protection, the gender pay gap, or protection against discrimination. The Conservatives' fundamentally anti-European attitude under Boris Johnson could mean such achievements become collateral damage as the UK seeks to break free of all the shackles of the European Union. At the same time, the Tories' harsh anti-immigration stance opens up scope to foster a paternalistic image of the family, reactivating the myth of migrants threatening British woman, who are thus in need of protection. That topos has already been exploited by UKIP.

Most recently, Brexit has made it clear that there has been an insufficient focus on the European Union's positive achievements, particularly in the field of equal opportunities and equal treatment as a dimension of European integration. Many British women did not realise until after the vote to leave the EU that their country's EU membership has helped to make very specific rights a reality for women in the UK. One important lesson that should thus be learnt from this process is that greater emphasis should be placed on these achievements in other Member States, which at least should help undermine women's support for anti-European right-wing populists.

TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?

UNITED KINGDOM

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New studies are added to the series on an ongoing basis.

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