

Is it really that difficult to find women to talk about the EU Referendum?

The significant absence of expert women's voices from media debates and academic events related to the EU Referendum has been widely reported. [Roberta Guerrina](#), [Toni Hastrup](#), [Katharine Wright](#) share a list of women EU experts and argue there are in fact many women voices on these issues and they are not difficult to find. More work needs to be done by political institutions, campaigns, and the media to engage women experts and their contributions in a mature and meaningful way.



It is now approximately six weeks from the date when the British electorate will vote in the EU Referendum. This has been billed as the vote of a generation, the opportunity to settle the issue about the UK's position in the EU once and for all. It was therefore unsurprising that when one of us tuned into [Radio 4's PM programme](#) on 12 May that this was the theme under discussion. We were however taken aback to hear correspondent, [Chris Mason](#) trailing a report by his colleague Eleanor Garnier on the difficulty of finding women to participate in discussions around the various social, economic and political issues entangled in this debate. In the end PM did not go into further discussion on the issue, which was somewhat disappointing, as the myth about women's engagement with and knowledge of politics that actually needs addressing.



Even before the beginning of the official campaign, debates about the EU have been dominated by male voices. Within and outside academic circles, this has become a discussion point and, as further evidenced by the PM programme, a story in and of itself. Since the possibility of a referendum became a reality, we have heard time and time again that there just aren't women experts to contribute on the issues. On the few occasions we hear from women, they are being asked about so-called women's issues. As women who work on the EU, we have been particularly frustrated by the way our contribution to our discipline and what is perhaps the most important debate for a generation has been relegated to the gender silo. This is not to say that gender and equality issues are not important (they are!) but women commentators can contribute to a full spectrum of issues, from economics, to security and immigration. Limiting space and opportunities for women's engagement in one of the most important debates in a generation ultimately sends a subtle, but damaging message, politics (particularly EU politics) is not women's business! The crystallisation of gender binaries in women's engagement with politics and pathways to political participation may well be one of the most pernicious outcomes of the current debate.



Image credit: [geralt](#) (pixabay, public domain)

We are frustrated by the significant absence of expert women's voices from media debates, but also from academic events within our own networks. The problem is demonstrated by the volume of submissions of all male panels to the excellent [Tumblr set up by Saara Sarma](#) and the twitter account [@EUPanelWatch](#) to name and shame 'manels' and draw attention to the issue. We are tired of constantly asking, 'where are the women?' And of course [there are women!](#) In fact, there are many of them and they are not difficult to find. Indeed, when the issue of the lack of women experts on the EU referendum debate came up a couple of weeks ago, we took it upon ourselves to compile a list of women from our professional and personal networks who we knew were capable of speaking to a lot of the issues under discussion. Most of these women are fellow social scientists from Universities and Civil Society organisations from across Europe. Beyond these, we also drew from the [Academic Association for Contemporary European Studies Experts on Europe](#), a publically available resource. There are lots of women on there too. Given the expertise available within our professional associations such as [Political Studies Association](#), but also initiatives like [The Women's Room](#) and [#WomenAlsoKnowStuff](#), there is no excuse! It is disappointing that this conversation is still on-going. We find claims that suggest that there aren't women experts or that they are difficult to find indicative of a wider social and political environment that continues to relate women's political participation to the area of social politics.

Rather, the absence of women's voices from the EU referendum debate speaks to two interrelated issues. Firstly, it raises the question about who is considered an expert and what expertise is valued. Secondly, it also highlights the vertical segregation of the academy, whereby only [20% of professors at UK universities are women](#). Women's absence from the highest levels of the academy contributes to the invisibility of women's knowledge and contributions to the gendered production of knowledge. At a symbolic level, women's absence from expert panels and the wider debate reifies the position of elite men at the heart of the profession and their contribution to the production of knowledge of political institutions and processes. At a substantive level, the invisibility of women and gender issues in the debate highlights the implicit bias of political discourse and marginality of social justice in the debate.



Image: EU Referendum Question Time, University of Surrey #SurreyUKEU

There are examples of good practice that should be highlighted. For example, the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey held a gender balanced [EU Referendum Question Time](#) event. Ensuring gender balance is important not only because the range of views that can be aired in a discussion or debate, but at a symbolic level because it sends a message that EU politics is relevant to women. The [Britain Thinks \(2016\)](#) survey for the Fawcett Society highlights a continued gender gap in women’s perceived knowledge about the EU and their subsequent engagement in the debate. Excluding women’s voices from the debate, either at the level of the official campaigns, or in the context of expert opinions only serves to reinforce these assumptions. Considering that [women have been identified as the “swing voters”](#) in this referendum, it is striking more is not done by political institutions, including the campaigns themselves, and the media to engage this demographic group in a mature and meaningful way.

For [A List of Women EU Experts](#) see this shared [Google doc](#) (additions and corrections welcome).

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