

# Five minutes with Sylvia Walby: “If the Eurozone crisis means that Europe fragments, that would be a serious problem for gender equality”

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*What is the EU's role in improving gender equality across Europe, and does the on-going Eurozone crisis have the potential to exacerbate inequalities in European society? EUROPP's editors spoke to [Sylvia Walby](#), Distinguished Professor of Sociology and UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, Lancaster University, about the impact the EU has made in tackling gender inequality, how different forms of inequality intersect, and the threat posed to gender equality by the Eurozone crisis.*



## **What is the role of the EU in promoting gender equality, and how important is the EU level to gender equality in countries such as the UK?**

The EU is extremely important for gender equality in the UK and across Europe. Gender equality is one of the key values embedded in the Treaties of the European Union that underpin Directives and UK law in this field. UK law on gender equality is stronger because of the EU. The EU level is also important for the regulation of both the UK economy and those aspects of gender equality that pertain to the economic level.

Within popular discourse across the EU there are many different understandings of gender equality. It is understood variously from vague notions of gender fairness, to more precise notions of equal treatment. The different ways in which people think about gender equality have impacts upon policy and practice. But, the most important powers of the European Union lie in its legal powers to enforce equal treatment in the areas where it has competence, which includes, in particular, employment. So even though there are different popular understandings of gender equality, the legal basis of EU powers on legal treatment makes a significant difference to the nature of gender relations.

## **Should the EU's remit extend to issues of violence against women?**

The powers of the EU are stronger over economic matters than in most other policy domains. So gender equality issues that are articulated through employment and the economy have greater consequences than others. For example, there is a well-developed tribunal and court based system for implementing gender equality in employment. There have been several attempts to extend this remit, such as through '[gender mainstreaming](#)' which is now part of European Union practice, and most recently attempts to extend it to issues of gender-based violence against women and girls.

The EU remit over this violence is strongest when the issue is embedded in cross-border crime, such as in the instance of the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. Another way in which this legal competence has been considered is that of human and fundamental rights. Perhaps the most effective route to the articulation of EU competence in the prevention of gender-based violence against women is through the understanding of this violence as a form of *gender discrimination*. There are on-going discussions as to the extent to which the EU remit applies to violence against women. I think the case is strongest when it is articulated as an instance of gender discrimination.

## **Do current EU developments support a 'gendered knowledge economy'?**

The EU has long had the ambition of becoming the best [knowledge economy](#) in the world. Gender relations are less unequal in the knowledge economy than in other parts of the economy, such as low technology manufacturing. This is particularly true of employment in the knowledge-intensive services that are based upon high levels of education since women are now as successful as men in obtaining general educational qualifications. So the building of a

knowledge economy, rather than an old-fashioned manufacturing based economy, would contribute to the reduction in gender inequality.

### **You've written on theories of inequality which incorporate gender, ethnicity, and class. How do these forms of inequality intersect?**

Gender, ethnic and class-based forms of inequality have a degree of specificity, but they affect each other as they intersect. One of the challenges in social theory has been to understand and theorise this intersection. The use of traditional understandings of systems in social theory has been one of the obstacles here. I work with [complexity theory](#) in order to theorise these systems, or regimes, of gender inequality, ethnic inequality, and class inequality as both separate systems, and systems which have mutual effects on each other. The new forms of conceptualisation of systems through complexity theory make it much easier to theorise these mutual effects than the older conceptions of systems, which treated systems as constituted by parts making up a whole. Complexity theory also allows better theorisation of non-linear processes, of sudden, rather than gradual changes in social relations.

### **Does the Eurozone crisis have the potential to exacerbate inequalities in Europe?**

The European Union has been very important in the reduction of some forms of gender inequality. So if the European Union is weakened by the crisis, this is likely to undermine one of the most important forces for gender equality in European societies. If the Eurozone crisis means that the European Union fragments, this will have serious implications for the project of gender equality.

However, the European Union has often developed its capacity and powers at points of crisis. At such moments, the European institutions have been deepened, moving towards closer union as a result of the adjustments made to engage with the crisis. So it is possible that there will be a reconstruction of the architecture of the European Union as a consequence of the financial crisis that might deepen and strengthen integration and thereby, in my opinion, strengthen the regulations for gender equality. However at this moment the tendencies towards fragmentation of the European Union appear to be the more likely outcome, thereby threatening to exacerbate the inequalities in European society.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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### **About the author**

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Sylvia Walby OBE is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University and was appointed to the UNESCO Chair in Gender Research in 2008. Her publications include [Globalization and Inequalities: Complexity and Contested Modernities](#) (Sage 2009), [The Future of Feminism](#) (Polity Press 2011), [Gendering the Knowledge Economy: International Perspectives](#) (co-ed with Gottfried, Gottschall and Osawa; Palgrave 2007), [Gender Transformations](#) (Routledge 1997), and [Theorizing Patriarchy](#) (Wiley-Blackwell 1990).

