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### Blog entry

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## EU Social and Gender Policy beyond Brexit

Ania Plomien

In the United Kingdom and across the European Union, Brexit continues to be the key social, political and economic issue of the day. It reflects as much current societal concerns as the long and complex history of the [UK's relationship with the EU](#) outlined by Linda Hantrais. Both were tested in the 23 June 2016 referendum. The UK's departure, scheduled for 29 March 2019, will be followed by an approximately two-year transition period of finalising and implementing the separation deal. Until then we are told to expect 'business as usual'. Business, of course, is going to be nothing but usual as social, political and economic life in the UK and across the continent carries on with a view to, rather than despite, Brexit.

What are the current developments at the EU level in which the UK, by virtue of leaving, is not taking part? Should people living and working in the UK take interest in them? Do they bear any gender and social policy implications post-Brexit?

In the 2017 Rome Declaration, marking the EU's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Union's leaders have pledged to work for a Europe that is safe and secure, prosperous and sustainable, social, and stronger on the global scene. Commitment to the social dimension entails the proclamation of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) aspiring to build a more inclusive and fairer EU. The Pillar, as I show in a more extensive [gender and social policy analysis](#), represents the EU's gender and social policy renewal by raising the visibility of gender and social issues (something acutely missing in Brexit debates) and setting concrete policy measures – for instance on work-family balance.

The Pillar's advancements comprise new and enhanced policies. Paternity leave, stipulating at least ten days of leave around the time of childbirth, compensated at least at sick pay level, is new. Carers leave, another new provision, offers workers caring for seriously ill or dependent relatives five days per year, compensated at least at sick pay level. The enhanced regulations concern parental leave (improved flexibility, longer individual non-transferable entitlement, compensation) and flexible working arrangements (rights extended to all working parents of children under 12 and carers with dependent relatives).

Should we in the UK care about these developments taking place across the Channel? I [argue](#) that we should. Whilst defending the EU's track record on gender and social justice is not straightforward, primarily because of their subordination to economic imperatives, the EU has developed an extensive social acquis with a firmly embedded principle of gender equality. This has contributed towards strengthening workers' rights in general and towards women's equality in social, political and economic life in particular. Through Europeanisation, policies in the UK have developed significantly in relation to the EU, [equality in employment](#) being case in point, as argued by Colette Fagan and Jill Rubery.

There is much scope for improving the UK's work-family balance policies and strengthening their role in addressing gender inequality in paid and unpaid work. Next to the continued relevance of good quality and affordable childcare services, working time and leave policies are key. According to [Eurostat](#), among the UK households with children under 12, as many as 26% cite finances as the main reason for not making use of (more) formal childcare

(compare with 16% EU average). Regarding paid working time, [data](#) indicate that patterns in the UK are strongly gendered:

- (a) 41% of women and 11% of men in employment work part time (compare with EU average of 32% and 9%, respectively)
- (b) the average number of weekly working hours are 32 for women and 41 for men.

The reverse gendered scenario in unpaid working time is clear from an [ONS analysis](#): differences in child- and adult- care and housework stubbornly persist, as on average women contribute 26 and men 16 hours per week. Finally, UK's leave policies do not support the redistribution of care work. Figures reported in the [Financial Times](#) and [government data](#) demonstrate that a much higher number of women (661,000) take the longer maternity leave than men (221,000) taking the shorter paternity leave, and a very small proportion (1-2%) of eligible parents share parental leave – the very instrument designed for fathers to play a more prominent role in childcare.

Although these domestic policies do not seem to diverge drastically from the EU's work-family initiative, it would be erroneous to claim that EU level developments are of no consequence. One reason is that the UK, as an EU member, has wielded much influence on the development of gender and social policy in the EU, at times applying breaks on more ambitious proposals. And so, as Roberta Guerrina and Annick Masselot warn, in the post-Brexit UK there might be [further marginalisation](#) of social and gender issues which tend to be pitched against business interests. The second reason is that while the space for renewing action for gender and social Europe appears to be widening, Brexit poses a risk to the development of the Pillar as the symbolic and material resources required to put the social at the top of EU policy agenda have to compete with managing Brexit.

For a fuller discussion of the themes referred to in this blog and an article by Alessio D'Angelo and Eleonore Kofman analysing [migration](#), see the themed section of *Social Policy and Society* entitled '[UK's Membership of the EU: Brexit and the Gains, Losses and Dilemmas for Social Policy](#)'.