

# Leave-voting men, Brexit and the 'crisis of masculinity'



*Brexit may have been driven by those 'left behind' by globalisation, automation, the evolution of manufacturing, and the increased inequality of both income and wealth. Some have suggested that this feeling of being 'left behind' is exacerbated for working-class white men, in declining industrial and disadvantaged areas in particular. **Julie MacLeavy (University of Bristol)** draws on research with Leave voters in Sunderland to argue that in this constituency many men do see their opportunities for economic advancement and achievement fading away, and identified that as a key motivation for voting Leave. But rather than constituting a self-evident 'crisis of masculinity', the roles played by gender conceptions in the Brexit vote point to a much broader and more complex series of questions.*

Economic stagnation and the experience of different forms of marginality are widely claimed to underpin the 2016 vote in favour of Britain leaving the EU. The Vote Leave campaign's vow to 'take back control' seemed to resonate with those feeling adrift and 'left out' of a changing economic and social environment. In particular, the process of deindustrialisation, the increasing dominance of feminised service-sector employment in which masculinity is often seen as a labour market disadvantage, and an ongoing lack of meaningful alternatives to paid work as a basis for male identity have been linked to a 'crisis of masculinity'. [Iain Duncan Smith](#) is amongst those expressing concern about the difficulties some men face in adapting to the gender order emergent from economic restructuring and the slow dismantling of patriarchal structures that has occurred alongside.



The Steel Men of Wearside at the Stadium of Light Photo: [Liam Swinney](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Such broad characterisations need to be treated cautiously and interrogated further, of course. Recent work by economic geographers on [UK regional differences](#) in recessionary cuts, crisis and recovery, as well as earlier research on [local cultures](#) of working class masculinity in deindustrialised Northern regions of the UK compared with an affluent service-dominated southern region, point towards the diversity of male experience. Whilst some men have been able to adjust and harness new labour market opportunities, it does appear that there are others for whom the spatially uneven effects of economic restructuring have served to fuel personal and political anxieties. Analysis of the British Election Study shows a gender gap among voters, with older males with few educational qualifications most likely to [vote leave](#), economically independent women more likely to [vote remain](#) and women dependent on a male partner tending to [vote in line](#) with his political preferences. Our own [case study research](#) further reveals that voters in Sunderland, as a deindustrialised city in the North East of England, voted to leave the EU in opposition to a system that they perceived had quashed their labour market capabilities through the reconfiguration of the gender and race 'order'. For older male voters in particular in that case, the deterioration in what had been the normative or standard employment relationship for white working-class men was consistently found to be associated in their view with EU policy supporting growing diversity of the labour market.

Such research indicates that in order to address the frustrations with the lived experience of economic and social transformation, channelled through the Brexit vote by UKIP and the wider Leave movement, we need to pay greater attention to complexities of contemporary gender relations. The extent to which social constructions of 'acceptable' masculinity have shifted in response to improved labour market equality for women, as well as the negative personal (and sometimes political) effects of the dismantling of status hierarchies based on gender difference that have been hard won by feminist campaigns, need to be critically evaluated and addressed.

More specifically there is a pressing need to understand the reasons why only some men recognise the benefits of women's recent gains. What reasons may exist to fear the EU's 'gender machinery'? We know that European efforts to secure equal rights have benefited gay, bisexual and transgender men who are afforded [protections](#) against historical oppressions and former limits on non-traditional gender and sexual behaviour, but ever-growing numbers of straight men are also now 'going against the grain' of previously dominant conceptions and expectations of masculinity. This includes men employed in what was once considered 'women's work' such as nursing or caring roles, as well as those in all sectors forging non-traditional employment and familial arrangements. Recent decades have, for instance, seen men harnessing the new opportunities available – in part a result of the EU's influence on UK [paternity rights](#) – for adding [nurturing and caregiving](#) to fathers' traditional roles of providing income. Why, then, the pockets of opposition to this?

Given [what's at stake for equality and diversity](#) we ought to broaden the Brexit conversation to ensure that 'gender' is not just equated with 'women' or how women voted. Gender *qua* women limits our understanding of the impact of recent economic and social developments. All too often the conditions that are leading to anxieties about manhood are glossed over, or used to infer a link between [men's struggles](#) and the opening up of jobs for women in a manner that bypasses the institutionalised injustices and gender inequalities that have long betrayed democratic ideals. By foregrounding gender and its intersectional articulations – with, for example, conceptions of 'valued' forms of work – we can better unpack the emotions that the Brexit vote has galvanised and address the array of problems from which they emerge, rather than treating connections to a 'crisis of masculinity' as self-evident or straightforward.

*The above draws on the author's [co-authored work](#) in the journal *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*. This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics.*

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