

EDITORIAL

Gender in Britain - The Long Road to Equality

GENDER has in recent years very much moved to the centre of cultural and human rights debates, almost surpassing but also intersecting with issues of race. The #MeToo debate, starting in the US in 2017 and eagerly taken up in Britain and other European countries, has made people realise that, despite theoretically achieved gender equality, not only in the world of film and the media but in many areas of working life as well as in their families and private lives women are still frequently victims of sexual harassment and attacks. At the same time the public attention in the western world to the problems of the trans minority has been heightened thanks to the growing output of autobiographies, novels, poetry, films and art by an increasing number of impressively creative trans people. So the state of gender equality in Britain had become a challenging topic to investigate for *Hard Times*, and 2018 was the obvious year to start our research: it was the centenary of women's suffrage in the UK.

The UK was not the only European nation to give the suffrage to women at that particular moment of time:

Germany did the same as well as several other European countries, followed by the US in 1920. It was mainly in recognition of their efforts during World War I, less as a result of their passionate campaigning in the pre-war years, that women were finally trusted to judge and decide in democratic elections. The moment was not especially early, but others – to be just – acted much later: in Switzerland, who would believe it, women got the vote only in 1971, in Saudi Arabia – less surprisingly and only hesitantly – in 2011. The trust of the British male MPs in their female compatriots did not reach very far in 1918: the Representation of the People Act, passed on 6 February, granted the suffrage only to women over 30 who met minimum property qualifications, thus excluding 60% of the female population. It took another ten years until the voting right was extended to all women on equal terms as men, including the age limit of 21. Nevertheless the first step to women's equality as citizens was celebrated in 2018 not only by the Fawcett Society and other women's organisations, but with innumerable events by public institutions all over the UK, including

major exhibitions in the Museum of London and the London School of Economics as well as special events in the Tate Gallery, the British Library, etc.



Suffragette memorabilia for sale in the Museum of London. © Photo: Anke Bartels

Despite these many instances of public remembering, most of the aims of this first wave of feminism were largely forgotten in the following decades. The backlash after both World Wars once again turned the majority of middle-class women into housewives, while working-class women mainly worked in the low-paid jobs considered suitable for them. It was only in the late 1960s (and here the Dagenham Women's Strike of 1968 marks another important anniversary to be celebrated in 2018) that an emerging women's liberation movement began

to articulate specific demands for a different society. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the time (inspired by the civil rights movement in the US, the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, the Prague Spring and students' protests in many countries as well as the emergence of a permissive counter-culture – which, however, did all not include women on their agenda or kept them at the sidelines) the second wave of the feminist movement in England was born. Feminists' demands for equality in all kinds of political and social sectors were first articulated at a famous meeting in Ruskin College in 1970. Astonishingly enough, many of these demands still seem very familiar and timely to us. This second wave with the famous slogan "The Personal is Political" was anything but a homogeneous movement: radical, liberal and socialist branches flourished. Still, black women were not included in a way that took account of their special difficulties, which led to the emergence of a specific black feminism. This then paved the way for what was later called intersectionality, an instrument of analysis that has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the 21st century.

Despite all best efforts feminism became subject to yet another backlash in the late 1980s, which was fuelled by a conservative turn in Britain and the US. Just as it had happened to their sisters at the beginning of the

20th century, their ideals were largely forgotten while they were reduced to “bra burners” in collective memory with feminism itself becoming the f*- word, the “thing” that could and should not be spoken about. Sadly, in a not uncommon generational reaction, young women took achieved progress for granted and trusted their “girlie power” to realise their personal wishes, not realising how much they fell victim to commercial interests.

Judith Butler and other third-wave feminists finally put the importance



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of gender back on the agenda, but in a new way. The notion of the performativity of gender along with a

critique of the heteronormative matrix revolutionised the way we now think of gendered and sexual identities. The field of feminism also opened up to further theoretical variations, e.g. to identity politics and a perspective that was strong on multivocality and a nuanced analysis which takes specific contexts and histories into account while avoiding homogenising and essentialising moves.

Yet have the continued discussions of unjust gender relations led to women’s equality in all areas of civil life? Far from it, as a glance at the most important areas will show. First of all, take a look at their financial situation. By law everybody has the same educational and professional chances, but women often do not achieve comparable careers and thus have to cope with a lower income than men. Though almost half of the working population (46%) is female, women still earn 21% less than men. This is partly because more of them work part-time (as single mothers or taking the bigger share of family duties), but also because they tend to be employed in lower paid jobs than men, especially in the five “Cs”; caring, cleaning, cashiering, catering, clerical work. Low pay translates into lower pensions, and the benefit cuts administered by the Conservative austerity policy have additionally worked havoc: thus female pensioners and single mothers are the social groups that run the greatest poverty risk. It is true, at the

other end of the social scale a growing number of women make it into top jobs, but far fewer than men: they take only 35% of leading administrative positions, 22% of university chairs, 22% of managerial posts in listed companies. In the creative industries the chances seem more even: since the 18th century there have been a great number of successful women novelists, and some female poets have reached fame in recent decades with two of them having achieved the highest honours: Carol Ann Duffy was appointed as Poet Laureate and Jackie Kay as Scots Makar. But in areas which require larger investments and team organisation like film, the theatre, big musical events, women are rarely to be found in influential positions as dramatists, directors, film makers. Also in the art market men still have the better chances.

And what about the political sphere? The picture is equally unbalanced. Though women won the passive voting right along with the active one, the number of female MPs has risen only slowly, to a maximum of 32% after the last election in 2017, and few have gained ministerial responsibility. The two female Prime Ministers, obviously not interested in feminist policy, both have appointed fewer female ministers (Thatcher none, May four out of 22) than Tony Blair, who worked with six. Labour has done more over the years to promote women so that at present 45%

of Labour's seats are held by women comparing to 21 % of Conservative seats. In the House of Lords, where women have been allowed to sit only since the Life Peerages Act of 1958, today they make up about 25% of the members. Even on the level of local politics women are still underrepresented: only 34% of the local authority councillors are female.

Yet despite the remaining inequalities gender roles have changed a lot to the benefit of women in the last hundred years. Not only have women in general become less house-bound, more financially independent and self-determined, changes in sexual morals and the availability of birth control have also had profound effects on women's lives and self-perception, but also on men's. Men, who additionally have had to cope with the loss of many traditional jobs through the structural change in the economy, have reacted with insecurity, and it has become much disputed what defines masculinity.



© Gay Pride. Photo: nancydowd (<https://pixabay.com/de/photos/stolz-lgbt-flagge-regenbogen-828056/>)

Women are not the only section of society who have had to fight for equality. Not only migrants, but people whose sexual orientation or identity deviates from the hetero-sexual norm have suffered from discrimination and even persecution. While lesbianism has never been officially forbidden (because the authorities refused to admit its existence), male homosexuality was considered a criminal offence from 1533 to the 1960s and until 1861 was even punishable by death. The case of Oscar Wilde is a heartbreaking example of the damage the legal situation could work in a man's life. Since then reform societies and individuals worked for change, many writers among them, until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalised male homosexuality (six years before the Federal Republic of Germany!). Today gay sexual orientation is legally recognised as part of a person's personality and accepted by the majority of the population. In 2005 civil partnerships were introduced, which in many areas gave equal rights to same-sex couples, in 2014 the same-sex marriage followed. The right to adoption was already granted in 2002. Yet despite such legal progress, increased acceptance by the cis population, even celebrated in the worlds of film, fashion and popular culture and admired by mass audiences in the public spectacles of the Guy Pride Parades, homosexuals are still not safe from discrimination and attacks by a

hostile and unteachable minority, and the percentage of registered hate crimes is high. Especially young people among a heterosexual majority in school and youth groups may have a difficult time.

The same is true of trans people, who number between 200,000 and 500,000, equalling 0.3 to 0.75 % of the population. Many prefer to keep their sexual identity private or practice cross-dressing, but some desire surgical reassignment. The Gender Recognition Act of 2005 grants everybody who truly wishes it to have a sex-change treatment on the National Health Service, and the numbers are steadily rising: 143 operations were registered in 2009, 172 in 2014. The Equality Acts of 2007 and 2010 guarantee legal protection, but one in five persons in 2017 had experienced acts of verbal or physical aggression, mostly committed by young people on young people, and a majority of 87% of such hate crimes remains unsolved. Many trans people also experience discrimination in daily life, in restaurants, faith services, by social services and in their search for housing or jobs. Despite the hype in the cultural scene and the media, the life of a trans-person is not easy, particularly not for the young.

The contributions to our issue of *Hard Times* have addressed many – though, of course, not all – aspects of the afore-mentioned issues of the current gender relations in Britain. A

gap we regret is that there is no article dealing with issues of the second and third wave of feminism in some detail, but are pleased with the wide range of topics that have been covered. We want to thank all our contributors for their wonderful cooperation and are particularly grateful for the permissions to reprint three original texts by two poets and a well-known novelist as well as to reproduce a number of artworks and film stills. Special thanks go to Irmgard Maassen for recruiting Christine Müller, Jennifer Henke and Katalina Kopka to our writing team.



Remembering the Suffragettes © Photo: Anke Bartels

In our first section, “Remembering Feminist History”, we try to establish a feminist genealogy, aiming to show how this history and its aftermath still concern us and are reflected upon today. **Anke Bartels** discusses how

the suffragettes successfully reclaimed spaces that had been closed to them analysing the example of the graphic novel *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* (2014), which ultimately takes the legacy of these women to the present. **Christine Müller** discusses the role of women in the natural sciences. While this specific history already started to be rewritten some fifty years ago, challenging this still male domain is in need of continued interventions to fight gender stereotypes and encourage girls and women to enter this field. We close this section with an excerpt from **Bernardine Evaristo**’s wonderful revisionist historical verse novel *The Emperor’s Babe*, one of her charming fictional reconstructions of black European history and a celebration of black women’s power.

The following section “Current Gender Discussions” takes us to the present, starting with **Bernardine Evaristo**’s views on gender, sexuality, feminism, sexuality and race in an interview conducted by **Ingrid von Rosenberg**. With the Windrush scandal fresh in mind, Evaristo comes to the conclusion that we are by no means as far as we like to think we are with regard to a truly open society. Masculinity is the topic of **Wieland Schwanebeck**’s article: he shows vividly how it is constructed in the editing room with collages playing an important role in the reproduction or subversion of male gender stereotypes.

Theories of Political Masculinities were the topic of a summer school at the University of Koblenz-Landau. **Thomas Gurke** and **Kathleen Stark** emphasise the participants' focus on an international as well as intersectional approach to masculinities in various fields. The final two contributions in this section focus on concerns of queer and trans people. **Rainer Emig**, in a brilliant and provocative essay, questions whether the always more inclusive legal framework is indeed an unmixed blessing for the LGBTIQ+ community. He suspects that legal equality, though hopefully leading to more social acceptance, also furthers the appropriation of once exclusively gay meeting places and events, important for the gay community's identity, by market forces. He also points to the possible dangers of an increasingly fragmented identity politics for the cohesion of society. This section fittingly ends with **Jay Hulme's** poem "I Am a Man", which impressively expresses the pain of a sensitive young trans person when, despite guaranteed legal protection, he is confronted with the hostile reactions of still too many people.

“Women's Realities Today” takes a look at the economic and political obstacles women are currently confronted with, appreciating their resilience in adverse circumstances and celebrating their success. **Kirsten Forkert** shows not only how austerity politics in

the UK hit women the hardest but also how traditional gender roles and heteronormativity underpin austerity rhetoric, which is reflected in the court case of *Monroe vs. Hopkins*. The next two contributions address the problems of marginalised women. While **Sabrina Mahfouz's** beautiful poems give a voice to women working in the sex industry, **Fanny and Sophie Rotino** focus on the fate of women and LGBTIQ+ refugees in the UK, who find themselves in a highly precarious situation despite the Human Rights Act of 1998 applying in Britain. In the cultural sector, we focus on theatre and the arts. **Gabriele Griffin** shows the impact of Black and Asian playwrights on the British theatre scene with plays discussing a wide variety of issues from transracial adoptions to political activism. The position of black women artists is the focus of Ingrid von Rosenberg's contribution. She shows four examples of successful careers, climaxing in Lubaina Himid's winning the Turner Prize in 2017, yet asks whether this recognition of individuals really means that black British women artists in general now have the same chances in the art scene as their white female counterparts or some star male black colleagues. Finally, we turn to another dire reality women have to face today, the politics of abortion in Ireland. As **Jennifer Henke** shows, the bodies of pregnant Irish women (and not only of these) continue to serve as

political battlegrounds despite some tentative attempts to change not only the laws regarding abortion but also to induce wide-spread social acceptance.

In our last section, “(The State of) Feminism Today”, we return to the political arena. **Georgia Christinidis** deplores a severe backlash for feminism, making out as one of the main causes an emerging populism. In contrast to this somewhat gloomy view, **Katalina Kopka** diagnoses a lively contemporary feminist activism, which makes uninhibited use of all types of social media and is now increasingly called a fourth wave of feminism. Finally, in the last contribution, **Annette Pankratz** turns to an artistic representation of current feminism: she analyses the first season of *Fleabag*, the very popular as well as prize-winning TV sitcom, which takes feminist ideas into the 21st century but with an ironic twist – thus perhaps paving the way again for notions of postfeminism.

Still, we would like to end this Editorial on a hopeful note because despite the obstacles that demands for gender equality have encountered over the decades and despite the numerous ways that backlashes have been staged, the voices of the various movements fighting against oppressive structures have never been completely silenced for long and have always managed to induce important changes.

Anke Bartels and Ingrid von Rosenberg