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Special Issue Article

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Abstract

The European Union has faced several crises in the past decades, including the economic and financial crisis, Brexit, a migration, climate change and security crisis, and the latest COVID-19 crisis. In this context, feminist scholars have shown how the causes and effects of the economic and financial crisis are strongly gendered. Generally, this literature suggests that crises can open a window of opportunity for gender considerations but may also promote policies which exacerbate gendered inequalities. Yet, the impact of crises on the attention to gender equality in European Union's external relations is still unknown. This is surprising, as the European Union has promised to mainstream gender in all external policies, and understands itself to be a normative power and gender actor in world politics. This Special Issue analyses how the European Union's identification of crisis and its policy responses to crisis in different external policy fields are gendered. The introduction situates the Special Issue within existing scholarship, theorises the central concepts of this Special Issue – crisis, gender (equality) and the European Union identities – and highlights how the different contributions advance our understanding of how gender figures in European Union's external relations in past, current and future times of crisis.

Keywords

crisis, European Union, European Union's external relations, gender, identity, intersectionality

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Since 2008, the notion of crisis has proliferated in European political and academic arenas, referring to Europe's economic and financial crisis, its migration or refugee crisis, its legitimacy crisis, an emerging security crisis and, currently, the health crisis related to the

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COVID-19 pandemic. In times of crisis, 'identities become salient and are fought over' (Risse, 2010: 2). Thus, against the background of crises, what kind of power does the European Union (EU) want to be, and is gender equality part of it? Will the EU reconfirm/redefine its identity as a promoter of gender equality, or will it let gender equality slip off its external agenda?

Worldwide, gendered inequalities and gender-based violence persist, while political and societal opposition to gender equality and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) rights has increased (cf. Köttig et al., 2017; Verloo, 2018). Also, EU history shows how crises sometimes provided a window of opportunity for putting gender equality on the European agenda (Hoskyns, 1996; Van der Vleuten, 2007), while at other times they pushed gender equality to the margins (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017).

Whether and how crises affect gender equality in EU *external* relations is still unknown. Yet, here the EU explicitly positions itself as promoter of its foundational values, which include gender equality. The EU (2016: 7) Global Strategy opens with the sentence: 'We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union' and lists all the crises challenging the EU. It continues:

> Yet, these are also times of extraordinary opportunity. [. . .] Grounded *in the values enshrined in the Treaties* and building on our many strengths and historic achievements, we will stand united in building a stronger Union, playing its collective role in the world (EU, 2016: 7, emphasis added).

Hence, this Special Issue is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the construction/identification of crisis in an EU external policy field gendered?
2. How is the response to crisis gendered, and which EU identities does it mobilise?
3. Which impact do crises and the EU's responses have on gender relations and the promotion of gender equality in EU external relations?

This introduction offers a background and framework for these questions. First, it briefly presents the literature on the EU, crisis and gender, flagging gaps and biases. Next, it critically discusses crisis, gender equality and EU gendered identity in relation to the contributions of this Special Issue.

Situating the Special Issue

Scholarship on EU and crisis has boomed since the financial crisis hit the West in 2008. Academic journals in the field of European integration have been dedicating Special Issues to 'EU and crisis'.[1] While this literature offers a starting point to explore EU external relations in times of crisis, it does not pay attention to gendered dimensions and impacts.

Feminist scholars, in turn, have applied a gender lens to crises in and of the EU, focussing on different aspects (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017: 4–7). Some discuss the consequences for women's and men's jobs, the role of men in producing the crisis and the role of men and women in economic and financial decision-making (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014; Prügl, 2012). Bruff and Wöhl (2016) show how coercive state practices in the

financial crisis, coupled with masculinised norms of competitiveness, intensified gender inequality in terms of paid and unpaid work and contributed to the feminisation of poverty. Others discuss how crisis affects heteronormative and racialised constructions of otherness, and how policies dealing with crisis tend to exacerbate intersecting inequalities (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018). Finally, authors scrutinised how crisis is discursively constructed, how these constructions are gendered and gendering, and who is able to narrate the crisis. For example, the *European Journal on Gender and Politics*' Special Issue on crises and gender equality asks, 'Who can access and make claims on Europe, and who cannot?' (Ahrens et al., 2018: 303).

Addressing the gender-blindness in mainstream literature, feminist scholarship on crises has predominately addressed the EU *internally*. Yet, feminist literature on EU *external* relations has shown that the EU falls short of its expectations regarding the promotion of sexual minority rights (Mos, 2013) and regarding gender equality in development (Debusscher and Van der Vleuten, 2012), migration (Freedman, 2017), security (Haastrup et al., 2019; Muehlenhoff, 2017) and trade policies (True, 2009). However, a thorough feminist engagement with the role of crisis in EU external relations is lacking.

This Special Issue bridges the gaps between the literatures on EU and crisis, gender and crisis, and gender and EU external relations. In the following sections, we critically discuss three concepts underlying all contributions to this issue, and highlight how they advance theoretical and empirical understandings of crisis and gender equality in EU external relations.

De-essentialising Crisis

We do not take crisis as given. In order to understand how (perceived) crises shape the EU's promotion of gender equality abroad, we focus on the underlying *politics* of crisis. Although there is no definite, all-accepted definition of the term crisis, we propose as a minimal definition: 'the perception or identification of a situation as disruptive and a call for action'. Crises are *disruptive* because they threaten pre-established orders and create an extraordinary situation that needs to be acted upon. Crises are *productive* as they imply a call for action (De Rycker and Don, 2013: 8–9) and have the potential for change. Crises are constructed by discourses and people (De Rycker and Don, 2013). Powerful actors – such as states, EU institutions and their spokes(wo)men – are well placed to shape crisis narratives. They '*identify, define and constitute*' the crisis and create implications for the kind of transformative action that follows (Hay, 1996: 244, emphasis in original). The boundaries for supposedly necessary or desirable responses are set by the definition of what or who causes the crisis.

Yet, this definitional exercise is rarely straightforward. As Boin et al. (2009: 82) theorise, crises 'typically generate a contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future'. For example, *Welfens'* contribution demonstrates how the EU combines different framings of the refugee crisis – as a crisis of border security and of migrant safety. Crisis responses consequently claim to address both simultaneously, by reducing the number of arrivals –irrespective of refugees' gendered protection concerns.

Depending on the problem definition, policy responses and political priorities differ. This begs the question of whether and how gender, in combination with other identity axes, figures in the respective crisis definition and proposed policy responses. For

example, *Allwood* shows in this issue how the EU's response to the crises of climate change and migration links development with these issues in new policy nexuses. Doing so, the EU lets gender equality slip off its development policy agenda, which used to be the most gender-friendly EU external policy. At the same time, *Beier and Caglar* find that the EU's second Gender Action Plan (GAP II) for external relations conceptualises gender equality in a comprehensive way in an attempt to address the gendered consequences of the economic and financial crisis, yet this is not reflected by the indicators of its operational framework.

However, crises may also lead to the 'consolidation of more routine forms of governance' or existing policies (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2016, 318). In this vein, *Hoijtink and Muehlenhoff* argue that the EU is capitalising on a gendered and racialised crisis definition locating threats to European security outside the EU in order to advance its military power. Thus, while crises lead to transformations of policy fields (Hay, 1996), the contributions to this issue suggest that a serious commitment to gender equality is not part of crisis-induced transformations. Rather, gender equality gets sidelined in crisis definitions and responses, or instrumentalised to advance other causes. Yet, the question is not only *whether* gender figures in a final document or political statement but also *what* the very understanding of gender and gender equality is.

Understanding of Gender and Gender Equality

The promotion of gender equality can take different forms: equal treatment referring to the creation of de jure equality, special treatment like empowerment policies for disadvantaged groups, and gender mainstreaming, a systematic consideration of gender bias in all policy fields and stages (Walby, 2005). However, gender equality is always part of discursive struggles: '[. . .] research and practice show that what is labelled equal opportunity in one context can be very similar to what is called empowerment in another, while the content of similar labels can diverge tremendously' (Lombardo et al., 2009: 1). Whereas we recognise that the concept of gender equality is always subject to contestation, we also emphasise a *relational* and an *intersectional* understanding of gender equality.

The contributions to this issue assume that gender equality is about different forms of power relations. Any understanding of gender is linked to a specific idea of how women and men (should) relate to each other and what women and men are. Dominant ideas of femininity and masculinity result from and reproduce power and hierarchies between genders (Enloe, 2014). From a feminist perspective, gender equality policies should eliminate hierarchies between genders. However, by inscribing specific roles onto women and men, gender equality policies often (re)produce hierarchical gender orders. For example, *Wright and Guerrina* find that the European External Action Service (EEAS) reproduced a gendered understanding of power when tweeting that the 'European Union is together Mars and Venus, military and humanitarian force'.

This Special Issue also understands gender equality in an intersectional way, taking the interactions between gender and other categories of difference such as race/ethnicity, class and sexual orientation seriously. Ideally, for gender equality to be achieved, differences produced by intersecting categories cease to matter (Butler, 2006). The contributions to this issue do not analyse the intersections of all categories and how they create distinct experiences of privilege and discrimination, but flag the inclusion and/or consequences of specific intersections. *Beier and Caglar* find that GAP II operationalises intersectionality

in terms of numbers on sex and age, omitting ethnicity/race in its indicators. The EU thus fails to consider intersectionality in a meaningful way. *Welfens* demonstrates that considerations of refugees' intersecting vulnerabilities and protection needs are absent from the EU's responses to the 'refugee crisis'. *Debusscher and Manners* suggest that an intersectional 'gender + lens' should move the focus to the micro-level, centring the people affected by EU external policies. Europe's colonial past makes such an intersectional approach to the EU's external relations especially relevant (see also Van der Vleuten and Van Eerdewijk, this issue).

De-constructing Gendered EU Identities

The question remains which gendered identities the EU displays in the international arena. This Special Issue analyses how the EU presents itself externally and what kind of identities it mobilises in times of crisis. Identities are always relational and distinguish between 'self' and 'other'. In doing so, the EU inscribes differences between the internal (or domestic) and external (Rumelili, 2004), the latter commonly presented as a threat and/or as being deficient, for example, lacking democracy, norms and values, such as gender equality. For instance, *Slootmaeckers* shows how the EU constructed an LGBTI-friendly identity by Othering Central and Eastern European countries throughout the accession process, and internal Othering towards the new member states. Similarly, *Van der Vleuten and van Eerdewijk* demonstrate how in its relations with the African Union the EU positions itself as ethical intervener, defining European societies and policies as the progressive norm and focussing exclusively on Africa as object of change.

We are interested in how crises offer the EU an opportunity to *define* and *stage* itself in different ways – as a normative and/or military power, as a teacher and a preacher (Van der Vleuten, 2017) or a combination of different identities – and how gender plays into this. In this vein, *Wright and Guerrina's* analysis of the EEAS' digital diplomacy challenges the EU's identity as a gender actor and reveals a strong marginalisation of gender equality in its tweets. Moreover, *Hoijtink and Muehlenhoff* trace how the EU increasingly aims to become a military power, privileging – what are considered to be – masculine traits along the way. Instead of trying to pin down what the EU's identity *is*, this Special Issue asks what the EU *does* in times of perceived crisis and what identities of the EU this conveys. We contest the idea that the EU *has* or constructs *a single* identity as an international actor (cf. Manners, 2002). Instead, we find that the EU constitutes multiple, often ambiguous and contradictive identities in its external gender policies, especially in times of crisis.

While we study *external* EU policies and relations, the contributions to this Special Issue also show how the internal and external are strongly connected. EU's dealings with the latest crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant economic recession, exemplify this. Scholars and policymakers already noted the gendered impacts of this crisis, such as the disproportional consequences for underpaid care workers and the increase of gender-based violence, and signalled the need to incorporate a gender analysis (Mantouvalou, 2020).

This Special Issue strengthens our understanding and theorisation of how gender figures in EU external relations in past, current and future times of crisis. We agree with Bain and Masselot (2012: 97) that times of crisis which call 'the fundamental *raisons d'être* of the EU [. . .] into question' are crucial moments to scrutinise how gender equality figures in the EU's identity formation. This is what the following contributions aim at doing.

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Note

1 For example, Special Issues: European Perspectives on the Global Financial Crisis (2009) *Journal of Common Market Studies* 47(5); European Integration in Times of Crisis: Theoretical Perspectives (2015) *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2); Theory Meets Crisis (2018) *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(1); EU Socio-economic Governance since the Crisis: The European Semester in Theory and Practice (2018) *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(2); EU Policies in Times of Crisis (2016) *Journal of European Integration* 38(3).

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