

Sexist and impossible standards are still entrenched in UK political reporting, new study finds

May 4 2023



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Female politicians continue to be subjected to sexist, impossible standards at the hands of the UK media, according to a new study

conducted by the University of Surrey.

The study analyzed more than 115 UK mainstream tabloid and broadsheet articles published directly after the resignation of former Prime Minister, Theresa May in May 2019. The [research](#) found a dominant theme in the assessment of May's legacy was her perceived inability to 'get Brexit done.'

A large proportion of the coverage framed May as politically and personally fragile despite her 22 years in Parliament. The study argues that this framing was rooted in sexist beliefs that associate femininity in politics with weakness.

Dr. Nathalie Weidhase, author of the study and Lecturer in Media Communication at the University of Surrey said, "We found language that strongly suggested that the 'feminine weakness' is the opposite of the 'masculine strength' that is deemed necessary to 'get Brexit done.'" Thus, Brexit has been constructed as inherently masculine, and women are considered a threat to this project, highlighting Brexit as a gendered political process."

"Unfortunately, in the eyes of the [media](#), female qualities, and women themselves, can only stand in the way of the success of Brexit as an inherently male political populist project."

As an example of the sexism female politicians are subjected to, the study shows how newspapers highlighted May's tears as an extraordinary act for a [politician](#), but also as proof that Theresa May did possess some feminine emotions. This unexpected display of emotions was met with sympathy across the [political spectrum](#). However, it also revealed a range of tensions throughout the British media landscape along political and gendered lines.

The study is published in the journal *Feminist Media Studies*.

Dr. Weidhase commented further: "Emotional performances come at a cost for women. They may make female political leaders more likable, but in turn they lose credibility and are judged as less competent—trapping them in a double bind that suggests that the assertiveness required for leadership is incompatible with the qualities associated with femininity, such as empathy."

"Female politicians are mediated as women first, politicians second, but are simultaneously meant to represent other [women](#) politically—an additional burden in itself. In the context of social media, this intensifies in violent ways with [female politicians](#) being regularly subjected to torrents of sexist abuse."

More information: Nathalie Weidhase, Theresa's tears: gendering mediations of populist leadership failures in Brexit Britain, *Feminist Media Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2023.2200552](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2200552)

Provided by University of Surrey

Citation: Sexist and impossible standards are still entrenched in UK political reporting, new study finds (2023, May 4) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-sexist-impossible-standards-entrenched-uk.html>

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