

Cronulla, conflict and culture: How can Muslim women be heard in Australia?

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Let's start by looking at the title of tonight's talk – what does the main title 'Cronulla, conflict and culture', have to do with this somewhat cryptic subtitle, 'How can Muslim women be heard in Australia?' I know some of you will be thinking, what is the relationship between the Cronulla riots and Muslim women? How do gender issues come up in trying to understand Cronulla?

This is the relationship I'm going to explore today – what I'm going to argue is that you can't fully understand debates about multiculturalism in Australia without adding gender into the mix.

So here goes...

Australia's new feminists

I want to begin by making a small observation about current Australian politics. I've been noticing a very interesting thing happening in political debate lately. All kinds of conservative male public figures seem to have become feminists.

In the last few days, John Howard has been defending gender equality in Australia and expressing his opposition to negative attitudes toward women from some members of society.

In the wake of Cronulla, Peter Costello argued for women's right to wear bikinis at the beach and not be harassed for how they choose to dress.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist, Paul Sheehan, recently wrote a book called *Girls Like You*, sticking up for victims of gang rape. He praises these young women for being strong and courageous fighters against a legal system stacked against them.

What's going on here? Everyone's defending women's rights. Have we won the feminist revolution? Why are our political leaders suddenly so concerned about gender equality and the treatment of women?

Of course, this is a very *selective concern* for women's rights. Ultimately, people like John Howard and Paul Sheehan only seem to be concerned for women when they have been victimised by a certain group in Australian society – and that group is Muslim men.

Conservative politicians and commentators are suddenly defending women's rights because this has become a way of articulating an anti-Muslim nationalism. As *Herald* journalist Julia Baird (2006) put it, 'the wars against Muslim nations in recent years seem to have brought out the previously hidden inner feminist in Western leaders'.

Misogyny is un-Australian

So what connects women's rights and an anti-Muslim agenda? According to this logic, Islam is a misogynistic religion that oppresses women. In Australia and around the world, Muslim women are oppressed by being 'forced' to wear the hijab and supposedly being confined to the home; in the West, *non-Muslim* women are oppressed by Muslim men who are seen to be naturally violent towards women, raping and harassing women at the beach, on the streets, and in other public places.

And this misogynistic behaviour is seen as part of an alien, backward culture that threatens Australia's social cohesion, that threatens Australia's liberal and egalitarian traditions.

When John Howard defends gender equality, often this is a disguise for his real goal which is to warn Muslims that they have to assimilate into Australian culture. He paints a portrait of Australia as a wonderfully egalitarian society, and this is essentially used as a weapon against Muslims.

Just in the last few days, Howard has been saying that Muslims have to fully integrate by learning how to speak English and by treating women as equals. On Friday, he was quoted in *The Australian* as saying that:

Fully integrating means accepting Australian values, it means learning as rapidly as you can the English language if you don't already speak it. And it means understanding that in certain areas, such as the equality of men and women ... people who come from societies where women are treated in an inferior fashion have got to learn very quickly that that is not the case in Australia (John Howard, cited in Kerbaj 2006)

This was a follow up to his comment earlier in the year that Muslims had worse attitudes to women than any other migrant group, even the Mediterranean cultures. These were his words, back in February:

'There is within some sections of the Islamic community an attitude towards women which is out of line with mainstream Australian society' (SMH, 2006). And 'For all the conservatism towards women and so forth within some of the Mediterranean cultures, it's as nothing compared with some of the more extreme attitudes' (Megalogenis, 2006).

So the issue of attitudes to women is being used by John Howard as a way of criticizing Muslims. Muslims don't fit into the mainstream because of their bad attitudes to women.

I'll quote again from Julia Baird's response to these comments. In her piece in the *Herald*, Julia Baird (2006) questioned:

Who is in this mainstream anyway? Are they our sporting heroes - the cheating Wayne Carey, the sleazy Shane Warne, the Bulldogs who were exposed for a culture of "roasting" women - having sex with them in turn - as a group bonding exercise?

I think it's obvious that Muslims don't have a monopoly on misogyny. But when violence against women comes from footballers and other sportspeople, there aren't many official penalties. When violence comes from Muslims, suddenly Australian women are under attack from misogynistic men. In our current public debates, the message seems to be that only Muslim misogyny is a threat to women's rights and moreover, a threat to the Australian way of life.

Cronulla: Protecting 'our women'

This kind of discussion really hit me during the time of the Cronulla riots, when I kept hearing about how Lebanese Muslims were harassing 'our women' on the beach. There was so much talk about 'our women' and 'their women', I began to wonder when women had reverted back to being the property of men.

This is what really got me thinking about how the language of women's rights had been so successfully appropriated by paternalistic men, out to protect women from the hordes of Muslim rapists and misogynists.

This is what I see as the link between the Cronulla riots and gender issues. Although there were obvious racial tensions at Cronulla, what struck me was how *gendered* these racial tensions became.

The hostility towards Lebanese Muslims often came down to their treatment of women, that was depicted as somehow un-Australian. In other words, misogyny is now considered to be un-Australian. Or at least it is when it comes from Lebanese Muslims.

I'll read some comments from people quoted in the media at the time of the riots. One local Shire resident, Shaun Donohoe, was quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* as saying: 'They look down on our women. They don't really assimilate to our way of life. I've been at war with them for ten years' (McMahon 2005).

Another man, interviewed at Cronulla on the day of the riots, said: 'They come down here, and they start with their mouth. They just bullshit to everybody. They harass our women. It's their religion' (Martin 2006).

A few politicians had similar things to say. Bruce Baird, the local MP, said that he hadn't seen the kind of problems we've got now, saying that the visitors were aggressive and had 'anti-female attitudes' (McMahon 2005). The NSW Police Minister, Carl Scully said: 'I am concerned a small number of Middle Eastern males appear to have a problem with respecting women and I think that was an underlying current [in Cronulla]...' (Zinn, 2006).

‘Ethnic’ crime?

These cases of ‘Lebanese Muslim’ men harassing women on the beach were just the latest in a long list of bad behaviour on the part of young MOMEA, as they’ve been called (i.e. Men Of Middle Eastern Appearance), in particular, the gang rapes of young women in the last few years, the subject of Paul Sheehan’s latest book.

From the beginning, these notorious crimes were overwhelmingly represented as Lebanese or Muslim men raping non-Muslim women, and this made them *a particularly un-Australian crime*. They were not just crimes against women, but crimes against Australia.

In 2001, for example, Alan Jones stated that ‘Lebanese Muslim gangs’ were ‘showering their contempt for Australia and our police on these young girls’ (*MediaWatch*, 2002). In his book, Sheehan (2006a) describes young Muslim men in Australia as a ‘cultural time bomb’ whose upbringing conditioned them towards sexual violence.

Of course I have no interest in defending men who sexually assault and harass women. As a feminist, I am outraged at all acts of violence against women. Although John Howard says we are in a post-feminist age, thousands of women’s lives continue to be damaged every year in Australia by sexual assault.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey conducted last year, over 400,000 women in Australia had experienced some form of violence in the previous 12 months (ABS 2005: 5).

And as the feminist movement has long argued, the legal system is still failing women who make complaints of sexual assault. According to the NSW Rape Crisis Centre, less than 1% of sexual assaults lead to conviction, and this is a figure that Paul Sheehan repeats on a number of occasions in his book.

On this point, commentators like Sheehan have given the feminist movement somewhat of a boost in getting some much needed publicity for this terrible situation.

However, what troubles me is that people like Sheehan only seem to be concerned about sexual assault when it involves Muslim perpetrators. What troubles me is when sexual assault gets popular attention only when it is part of a larger anti-Muslim agenda.

New Matilda magazine recently published a review of *Girls Like You* by Jane Caro, who says that she finds it hard to accept Paul Sheehan’s new campaign for women’s rights, knowing that it is only being used to justify his long-held prejudices.

Caro writes: ‘Sheehan is particularly outraged about White girls being raped by Muslim men. Feminists are outraged about *all* women who have been raped by any kind of man’ (Caro 2006: 2).

This is really key. The problem with having advocates like Sheehan is that he insists on representing rape as if it were a racialised crime. As if violence against women is

to be blamed on 'Muslim' or 'Lebanese' *culture* for being intrinsically disrespectful of women. As if Lebanese or Muslim men have a monopoly on misogyny.

Crime is not caused by your ethnicity. As criminologists have long pointed out, there is no simple correlation between ethnicity and crime in Australia. In Shakira Hussein's review of Sheehan's book, she reminds us that there is a total lack of empirical evidence that Muslim men in Australia are any more likely to commit rape than anyone else. And as she says, 'Many Muslims do indeed have repellent ideas about rape but so do significant numbers of non-Muslim Australians' (Hussein 2006).

In the aftermath of the Cronulla riots, many people reminded us that misogyny is in fact no stranger to Australian beach culture. I mean, who here remembers *Puberty Blues*?

In case you're not familiar with the book, *Puberty Blues* described the lives of teenagers growing up in Cronulla in the 1970s. The authors, Gabrielle Carey and Kathy Lette, drew on their own experiences to describe how Cronulla girls, desperate to be included in the 'top surfer gang', slavishly following the orders of surfer boys, doing everything from fetching their 'banana fritters and chocolate thick-shakes' (Carey and Lette, 1979: 2) to losing their virginity in the back of panel vans at the age of thirteen.

This is not a sub-culture that has the best attitudes to women. Remember that the Australian surf scene was known for the institution of the 'gang-bang'. Over the years there have even been accounts of rival surfing groups settling their disputes by offering up a 'sacrificial' woman (Schofield 2004: 48).

Just a few years ago, one of the authors of *Puberty Blues*, Gabrielle Carey, commented on how sad she was that the book *was* still so relevant, because so little has changed in Australian beach culture (Carey, 2000).

As feminists have always pointed out, bad attitudes to women are not confined to any particular cultural group. Therefore it's not having a Lebanese or Muslim upbringing that causes you to commit sexual violence. It's important to remember this even when perpetrators themselves use cultural explanations to excuse their behaviour.

This is exactly what happened in the notorious case of the so-called K brothers, who migrated to Australia from Pakistan, were convicted of gang raping four young girls in Sydney in the early 2000s. They're known as the K brothers because one of them was a juvenile at the time of the offences, so they still can't be named.

In court, the K brothers used all kinds of lies to try and proclaim their innocence, and in his book, Paul Sheehan rightly demolishes all of these arguments. As a last desperate measure, the brothers resorted to a cultural defence – ie. it wasn't my fault, my cultural upbringing made me do it. I didn't know what was the appropriate way to behave in Australia towards White women.

This is a tried and true method that feminists have challenged in many countries, because usually the cultural defence is used by men from minority backgrounds to explain or justify sexual assaults, attempts by fathers to marry off their young daughters, or honor killings of daughters, wives, or sisters (Adelman et al 2003: 113).

In the case of the K brothers, Paul Sheehan even sees through this final argument, pointing out that rape and adultery are also crimes in Pakistan.

And yet, throughout the book and in all his newspaper columns on the issue, Sheehan continues to represent these crimes as crimes of Muslims against non-Muslims. Although he refutes the K brothers' attempts to use their culture as an excuse for their crimes, in his next breath, Sheehan wonders 'how many other cultural time bombs [are] ticking amid the Muslim male population living within the liberality of Australia?' (2006a: 294).

By accepting this view of the rapists as cultural time bombs – a phrase coined by their defence lawyer as a last ditch desperate measure – Sheehan is in fact legitimising the attempt by the rapists to excuse what they did by resorting to the cultural defence. These are not Muslim crimes, any more than Anita Cobby's murder was a Catholic crime.

Colonial feminism: a grand tradition

Of course, there's nothing new in these rhetorical strategies that portray other cultures as being barbaric towards women. As Edward Said explained in his classic, *Orientalism* (1979), the Middle East has long been seen as a site of despotism, irrationality, backwardness and the mistreatment of women.

The feminist scholar, Leila Ahmed, writing about European colonialism in the Middle East, coined the term 'colonial feminism' to describe the feminism 'used against other cultures in the service of colonialism' (Ahmed, 1992: 151).

In colonial days, Western governments routinely pointed to the barbarism of Islamic societies, seen in their treatment of women, to justify colonialism and the 'civilising mission' of the West. And of course, there was no greater symbol of the oppression of Muslim women than the veil. So 'de-veiling' women became a key part of the English and French 'civilising mission' in the Middle East.

In the words of Lord Cromer, the British colonial governor of Egypt at the turn of the 20th century (1883-1907), the Islamic practices of veiling and seclusion of women were 'the fatal obstacle' to the Egyptians' 'attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation' (cited in Ahmed, 1992: 153).

More recently, in our own era, this same logic was used to justify the American crusade against the Taliban. As I'm sure you remember, the invasion of Afghanistan started as a war against terrorism, but somehow gradually became a mission to 'liberate' Afghan women. A war that began as a campaign to bring Al Qaeda to justice and to apprehend Osama Bin Laden somehow turned into a campaign to save Afghan women from the Taliban.

And this was a war that the US won, according to George W Bush. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush baldly stated that the US invasion had liberated Afghan women, proclaiming: 'The last time we met in this chamber, the mothers and

daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free' (Bush, 2002).

Of course it came as no surprise that this concern for Afghan women was short-lived. The concern for Afghan women vanished as soon as it was no longer needed in the war propaganda machine. Five years on, Afghanistan's oldest pro-democracy women's organisation, RAWA, states that everyday violence is at unprecedented levels and that the US simply replaced the Taliban with other fundamentalist warlords (www.rawa.org). But these words are falling on deaf ears in the West.

'We'll fix you, you nappy heads': Racist violence against Muslim women

In a similar way, Muslim women's concerns about everyday violence in Australia are also falling on deaf ears. The Australian government's supposed concern for women oppressed by Islam has not been matched by a concern for the hundreds of Muslim women who have been victims of violence at the hands of 'mainstream' Australians.

As HREOC (2004) and other organisations have documented, Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab, have borne the brunt of recent tensions, with hundreds of reported incidents of physical and verbal assaults, including being stalked in public, having objects thrown at them, and having scarves ripped off their heads. The quote on the screen – 'We'll fix you, you nappy heads' – was one of the comments documented by HREOC, reported by a woman in Victoria.

Fear of being abused or attacked in public has led to many Muslim women changing their daily routines, for example, spending much more time inside their homes, avoiding public transport, or only going out in groups.

Feminist research has documented how fear actually structures women's everyday lives in urban environments. For many women, safety strategies often involve trying not to stand out, for example, trying not to look like you're lost or alone, or dressing conservatively to downplay your sexuality (Kern 2005: 368).

In the current environment, these strategies are just not possible for many Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab. How can you possibly not stand out when the hijab has become so politicised as a marker of difference?

But not only have our political leaders *not* expressed their outrage at the victimisation of Muslim women in public places; politicians like John Howard, and of course, Bronwyn Bishop, have contributed to the situation we have today, that defines putting a scarf over your head as an act of provocation that can undermine your physical safety.

So why are politicians not devoting the same kind of energy to defending Muslim women's right to go about their everyday lives in safety? Obviously when it comes to protecting women's rights, some forms of violence are unacceptable and un-Australian. Others are just part of everyday life.

Who should be defending Muslim women?

So how should women be responding to this political logic? In another of his recent columns in the *Herald*, Paul Sheehan blames Western feminists for abandoning their Muslim sisters by not speaking out against Muslim rapists.

He writes, 'In Australia and Europe, [feminists'] response to the growing levels of sexual intimidation, harassment or suppression of women by Muslim men has either been a deafening chorus of silence, or denial and blame-shifting' (Sheehan 2006b).

In response to this accusation, I've been hearing various Muslim Australian women saying thanks very much, but we don't need Western feminists to be speaking on our behalf. As Shakira Hussein (2006) put it,

Articles demanding to know why "Western feminists are mute on the plight of their Islamic sisters" are a little confusing for those of us who are simultaneously Western (even if not White), feminist and Muslim.

Her argument is that Muslim women do not need to be defended by Western feminists, because this assumes that Muslim women don't have a strong voice of their own.

And this is the assumption that is at the heart of a lot of current public debate. The more Muslim women are represented as simply passive victims of an oppressive culture, the less we can hear what they have to say for themselves.

In my discussions with Muslim women in Sydney, I am often impressed by the strength with which they assert that their beliefs and commitments are their own – no one is forcing them to wear a hijab, no one is forcing traditions down their throat.

And yet the image of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' is so powerful that it seems to create a situation where some things can't be heard. For example, I've often heard Muslim women saying that to them, wearing a hijab is an act of empowerment. Wearing a hijab gives them the freedom from being objectified by men – the freedom to be respected for their intellect and capacities as a person, rather than for their appearance.

Wearing a hijab is also about expressing who you are, expressing your identity. This is one of the reasons why so many young women are wearing the hijab now – and research suggests this is happening in many Western countries. As a response to racism from society, young women want to wear the hijab as a statement of pride in their community and beliefs.

One of the things I've found most interesting in the research is when young women decide to wear the hijab *against* the wishes of their parents. We have this stereotype in Australia that young women are *forced* to cover up by their family. But in some cases, there have been disputes within families because young women *want* to wear the hijab – for all the reasons I've discussed – while their parents prefer that they don't, knowing that it is likely to cause problems of discrimination or even threaten their safety.

Despite all of this, the overwhelming symbolism of the veil is that it is *inherently* oppressive and that it is *forced* on women regardless of their wishes. And this symbolism seems to function as a barrier preventing us from actually hearing how Muslim women experience things themselves.

In a similar way, the stereotype of the Muslim woman as someone who is downtrodden and oppressed seems to function as a barrier preventing us from seeing that there are strong, savvy, and independent Muslim women who live all around us.

In my research, one of the things I've found most inspiring is meeting and working with young women who are so strong and articulate about their identities and what they believe in. I think their strength comes partly from having grown up in such a challenging time, which has forced them to be extremely self-aware & extremely skilled in representing their identity and values to a range of people.

Again, research from many Western countries shows that particularly since September 11, the pressure on Muslim communities has led to Muslims learning a lot more about their faith and history than they might otherwise have done, in order to respond to questions or accusations from people. Young Muslims in particular, who have grown up in the West, have often stepped into the role of explaining Islamic practices and metaphorically translating between Muslim communities and the broader society.

All of us who are children of migrants are used to speaking across a wide range of different cultural contexts. But young Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab and therefore are so *visibly* Muslim, have really taken on quite a challenging burden of representation. And the young women I've encountered in my work have really embraced this challenge and take pride in articulating their identity and values to the rest of society.

And yet, in our current climate, Muslim women are overwhelmingly represented as passive victims who need to be saved by heroic white men. But this rescue mentality does little to help improve the lives of Muslim women in practice. In fact, it seems that the more public figures go on about protecting women's rights, ironically, the more this can undermine our ability to hear women's own voices. This is what we need to challenge.

As an outsider to the Muslim community, I feel that this is the best contribution I can make – not to try to speak on behalf of Muslim women, but to understand and change the political context within which they can be heard. I don't have any grand, arrogant plans for saving Muslim women or liberating them from oppression. Only someone as monumentally deluded as George W Bush could think of himself as the saviour of a group of people he knows next to nothing about.

But for those of us who really are concerned about women's rights, there is a lot that can be done to open up a space for women to be able to articulate their own concerns. There is a lot that can be done to open up a space where women can speak on their own terms, rather than constantly having to respond to the latest attack. We also need a space that can hear the diversity of women's voices, because obviously, not all Muslim women want the same thing.

At the moment, this space is being taken up by politicians and commentators claiming to be concerned about women. To a lesser extent, it's also being taken up by conservative spokespeople from the Muslim community, who are usually men, claiming to represent the community, but often not really representing the concerns that women in the community have. This is the final issue I want to address tonight.

Where are the spaces for debate?

This last point is really a question about how women from minority backgrounds can speak out when there are so many more powerful people in society clamoring to represent their interests.

Among Muslims in Australia, community leaders are obviously feeling the need to unify the community in the face of the unprecedented onslaught against them. There is this imperative to defend the community and defend Islam at all costs. This is understandable. But when a community is under attack, this is not an environment that's conducive to hearing a diversity of voices, to having debate, to be advocating for reform within the community.

This can clearly have negative consequences for women. For example, the manager of the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, Joumanah El Matrah, has criticised male community leaders for taking on the role of 'the guardians and keepers of tradition', and for conflating holding the community together with maintaining traditional practices and beliefs that can be detrimental for women (ABC, 2005).

In Sydney, the vice-chair of the Ethnic Communities Council, Saeed Khan, has questioned why conservative religious leaders have such a stranglehold over any public representation of the Muslim community. Khan's argument is that these religious leaders don't represent the majority of Muslims in Australia.

This also applies to the PM's Muslim reference group, which is the main way the government is consulting with the Muslim community. According to Khan (2006), 'This is a nonsense, since these people do not represent the community'.

Of course, this problem is not something specific to Muslim communities. There are not many community leaderships that aren't dominated by powerful, often wealthy, groups of conservative men.

In a lot of ways, as Saeed Khan hints at, this problem arises because of how minority communities have been politically constructed over the years by government policy and by media practices. There is this assumption that ethnic communities are organic, homogenous units, so that governments and the media simply need to consult with a particular community leader and then they will know what the entire community thinks.

When it comes to ethnic communities in Australia, this has been institutionalised in how ethnic community organisations are funded and consulted by governments, the so-called ethnic group model. Governments have their chosen organisations and spokespeople to whom they give official recognition and funding, and these same people are usually the ones the media turns to for comments.

This is a very essentialist way of looking at communities. It doesn't do justice to the diversity of views and experiences within communities. Issues that are not on the agenda of the officially recognised body often just don't get an airing. In many communities for example, these might include issues like domestic violence, which is always seen as something you can't discuss for fear of bringing shame to the community.

So often the views that are marginalised are those of women, and usually young people as well. It's not that women and young people don't have strong voices or issues they want to discuss, but what is missing is a space within which they can be heard.

I'll just finish by talking a little about the research project I am involved in at UTS. A part of this project is about helping to create the spaces where women can develop their capacities and be heard as members of the community.

The project is called 'Sanctuary and Security in Contemporary Australia' and it's a partnership between UTS and the Muslim Women Association. The research looks specifically at Muslim women's own efforts at coming together and forming networks for mutual support and advocacy. It explores the extent to which Muslim women's networks provide a source of safety or sanctuary in what feels like an increasingly insecure world.

What I am learning from the project is that having strong and independent women's networks is crucial if we're going to challenge not just gender discrimination but also racial and religious discrimination. As I've been arguing, when we have a political climate where racism and anti-Muslim hostility so often uses gender issues as ammunition, it is crucial that women have their own spaces to support each other and work towards social change.

Ultimately, to bring this discussion back to where we started, what we all need to work towards is breaking the shackles that have tied women's rights together with an anti-Muslim agenda. It's clear that John Howard and Paul Sheehan's pseudo-feminist contributions have less to do with any real concern for women, and more to do with peddling their long-standing prejudices.

Women's rights are important. They're too important to be simply used as a tool in a political war against cultural diversity in Australia.

Thank you.

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