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Gender, race and religion: how useful is the idea of “intersectionality”?

By Dr Bronwyn Winter

The idea of “intersectionality”, as first theorised by feminist scholars in the US in the 1990s, can at first appear a useful way to discuss the interaction of gender, race and religion as it suggests that different types of identities and oppressions meet and interact in a complex network, rather than existing as discrete, monolithic and incommensurable phenomena. It thus seems to offer a way out of the bind of an essentialising identity politics and of what feminists have sometimes jokingly called a “shopping list” of oppressions: and the more oppressed-identity boxes one ticks off from a list, the closer one is to winning the oppression one-up-womanship trophy. In, as satirical group National Lampoon put it in the 1970s: “If you’re not a black working class disabled lesbian, you’re an oppressor, pig!”

Intersectionality, however, continues to share some of the pitfalls of identity politics as it still considers race, class, and “gender” oppression as structurally and ideologically distinct. That is, even if “intersectionality” allows the notion that at the point at which they intersect, the different systems impact differently (e.g. women do not experience racism in the same way as men), they are still seen as developing on independent continuums. Yet, when one reads racist, colonialist and nationalist literature (including anticolonial nationalism), it is full of sexualised metaphors. Racialised men are hypersexualised and seen as sexually dysfunctional in much the same way as all women are; colonisers speak of “penetrating” and “sowing their seed” in colonised countries (a French politician even suggested in 1951 that the French government had been too “flaccid” in relation to its North African colonies and needed to “get it up”); men engaged in anticolonial struggles write endlessly of being emasculated, of their countries being raped and “their” women being appropriated. As many feminist scholars have observed, rape is the metaphor for colonisation, and being emasculated is the metaphor for being colonised. The more one reads such literature (fiction and nonfiction, from speeches and pamphlets to more scholarly work), the more it becomes evident that male domination is the overarching system out of which the ideologies and structures of racism have developed. Maleness equates with humanness, and to dehumanise means to feminise.

Within colonial relationships, the appropriation of women became the ideological stakes between colonisers and anticolonial resistants, and women's dress and behaviour continue to be the object of often obsessive male scrutiny. Women continue to be the guardians at the gates of culture and identity, they symbolise the borders that men draw between them, sometimes in hostile confrontation, sometimes in an elaborately orchestrated collusion to ensure women stay in their allotted cultural role.

The degree of men's obsession with women's behaviour is nowhere more apparent than in debates over gender and religion, of which the Islamic headscarf (hijab) has become emblematic. There is no other item of clothing—and certainly no item of *men's* clothing—that has been the focus of such longstanding and universal obsession. Indeed, women's head covering more generally has been an issue for millenia, notably albeit not exclusively within the three related monotheistic cultures; men, on the other hand, are encouraged to grow beards. Hair symbolises sexuality, and covering or displaying it has sexually coded meanings. More generally, if one delves into religious texts and traditions, once again notably albeit not solely the monotheistic ones, one finds an alarming yet predictable preoccupation with the regulation of women's behaviour.

Within such a framework, it is extremely difficult for women to have an independent voice, for any transgressive action will lead to either co-optation or severe punishment. If women respond to racism or anti-Muslim sentiment by displaying the hijab, they are assumed to be subservient to Islamic men by some or become co-opted in the service of a conservative religious agenda by others. If they refuse to wear it, they are either praised or condemned for being “Westernised”.

Gender, race and religion are not separate systems that “intersect”. They are intertwined manifestations of a complex yet highly efficient system: male domination.

Dr Winter has been teaching at the University of Sydney since 1989, where she is currently director of the International and Comparative Literary Studies program, and Associate Dean, Undergraduate Matters, as well as teaching in French Studies, European Studies and International and Global Studies.

Expectations and the Global Financial Crisis
By Graham Young

What can polling tell us about the global financial crisis? Quite a lot actually. Polling is not necessarily good at picking turning points, but once a new trend has started, it can give a view of expectations which are one of the most important determinants of what will happen.

Our “What the people want” January qualitative poll on Australian politics provides some guidance as to what will happen over the next years.

Keynesian pump-priming has become fashionable again. First world governments see this crisis as being similar to the Great Depression. Their solution is to try to inject money as quickly as possible into the economy.

At the same time they can't afford to let their electors think that the economy is that bad because if they do electors might save rather than spend - so official forecasts of growth tend to lag the real economy. What do voters think of this?

Well, in February, our respondents were much more pessimistic than government forecasts. At that time treasury forecast growth of 2% this year. 56% thought that was too high.

The depths of voters' pessimism was confirmed when I saw research by international pollster TMS. 57% of Australians thought we were heading for a depression, and 51% thought the crisis would last at least another one to two years.

This divergence between the official line what voters think results in a credibility deficit which damages the government's ability to talk-up the economy.

It also has impairs pump-priming.

Before Christmas the government gave Australians \$10.4 Billion to spend. They don't appear to have spent much of it. Our survey confirms this, with only a third of recipients saying they spent it.

Most saved or paid down debt, with one in five deciding to spend it on maintaining or upgrading their house. So, if you wanted to pump-prime the economy now, perhaps the best way to do it would be to give voters a voucher for their local hardware store so they could lavish it on their favourite asset. Giving it to them directly means it won't be spent any time soon.

This is what you would expect if voters thought things were going to get worse before they got better. It's not that they won't spend money, but they will put surpluses away until they need them

But it may not be as bad as it sounds as we found that voters were much more pessimistic about national circumstances than their own. When asked about the direction in which Australia was heading only 43% of respondents thought Australia was heading in the right direction. This compared to 52% who thought their personal

circumstances were heading in the right direction. This could reflect the fact that 70% felt secure in their job while only 14% felt insecure.

Still, they're not overly confident because a third had deferred plans to retire as a result of the crisis, and when it comes to investment most preferred cash investments over superannuation, housing or shares.

All of which suggests that the Australian economy will probably do better than most of its competitors and that banks will have more trouble finding borrowers than depositors in the short-term. And if this continues to be the case, asset values probably aren't going to rise very quickly. If you're the government you should keep your hands in your pockets until much later, and see how things go. And if you're looking for a new business venture, something to do with home renovation would probably go like a bomb.

Graham Young is Chief Editor & Founder of Online Opinion. He is a writer, and a former vice-president and campaign chairman of the Queensland Liberal Party.

I lost my femininity...don't lose yours.

By Kath Mazzella/Hayley Solich

Fifteen years ago, following my life saving cancer operation to remove my clitoris, vulva and lymph glands, I visited a friend in hospital. As we were talking about my operation, the lady who shared the room overheard our conversation. She told us about her friend who had the same procedure 8 months prior. I was so excited to know that someone else had been through my tragic experience, that I asked for her friend's contact details with the intention to connect with someone who knew my pain.

When I arrived at her friend's home, the moment our eyes met there was an instant connection. She lifted her dress and I lifted mine. In that moment, words were not required as a lifetime of understanding passed between us. We remain sisters to this very day. The funny thing was that we had both requested to be connected with someone who had been through a similar experience and had both been refused on the grounds that they believed it would be too depressing.

It could not have been further from the truth. This event fired in me a passion to get women talking about this issue so that they can be empowered.

So began my 15 year awareness campaign...

After placing an advertisement in the Woman's Day, I was inundated with women's heartbreaking stories of their Vulval traumas. There were women who had experienced the same process (removal of genitalia), some with huge complications; women who were no longer able to have sex and their concerns about their partners; women whose vitality had been destroyed and now lived with the daily shame and life long complications. These women were suffering with constant burning pain, unable to sit or stand for long periods of time, with depression, with leakage and incontinence. Some now had to pass their waste through their vagina, can you even begin to imagine that?

Listening to their stories was excruciating and soul destroying. To think that these women exist in our world, some of whom are actually dying, and yet many women find it uncomfortable to acknowledge, talk about or even take on board the lessons learned from their suffering. It seems that we take for granted this magnificent part of our body until we no longer have its full functionality.

So what is the message?

To women who are in leadership you have a valid role to play in spreading the message that women have choices, in creating a culture where the old "taboo" subjects are brought out into the open and normalized. After all, what is success if you no longer have your health or your enjoyment of your body? And how would

your family cope if you had to experience what I or others have experienced? Learn from our lessons. Arm yourself with knowledge and share your knowledge with others.

When this happened to me I was a working wife and mother with 3 children, and it literally shattered our world. I never expected this to happen to me. I was so busy with life, that I didn't comprehend the need for me to take ownership and responsibility for my own body and to be more vigilant in understanding the risks and symptoms associated with Gyn health. My message to others is be aware. Take the time to know. You only get one shot at maintaining a healthy body and when you lose such a vital part of your body, it is devastating.

If someone had told me that I would have to spend 15 plus years unable to have a fulfilling sexual life and that I could have prevented this through better knowledge of 'below the belt' issues, including sexually transmitted infections (ie HPV), I would have embraced the knowledge that could have kept me safe. It truly is destiny-shaping information.

I am proud to say that Australia is leading a global initiative to heighten the awareness of gynaecological health through the implementation of an International Gynaecological Awareness Day on 10 September of every year. It is very gratifying to see my vision coming to life and I implore you to consider leading the women you influence by organizing an event on this day in your corner of the world. I can't be in every city of the world, but people just like you can do something right where they are and before you know it, we will have the whole world covered. To find out more information about the day, visit <http://www.speakingopenly.com> and download the International Gynaecological Awareness Day kit.

Kath Mazzella is a gynaecological cancer survivor. After her surgery she discovered how little women knew and talked about gynaecological conditions, and how many women were suffering in silence. This empowered Kath to go on a journey. After placing an advertisement in a women's magazine, Kath was able to contact others with similar experiences and this drove her to establish the Gynaecological Awareness Information Network Inc. (GAIN) which has informed and supported thousands of women.

Diversity in a Downturn: Responding to a GFC

By Nareen Young

The fallout from the global financial crisis (GFC) is beginning to bite in Australia. Since a 20-year low unemployment rate of 4.0% in February last year, it has continued to creep up – in February this year it stood at 5.2%. Meanwhile Treasury has predicted that jobs growth will slow to a complete halt in coming months and the unemployment rate will hit 7% by June 2010.

While unemployment is trending up, the jury is still out on whether any particular diversity groups are being disproportionately affected. Comparing ABS unemployment rates between February 2008 and January 2009 across age groups, countries of birth and so on revealed no definitive trends yet, although cultural diversity will probably be affected by the government's recent decision to cut the numbers of skilled workers allowed into the country by 14%.

We at Diversity Council Australia suspect, however, that many organisations have only started reducing their workforce this quarter. Recent research identified that 63% of companies were forecasting redundancies in the coming year, with an average planned cut in workforce size of 5.5%. Apparently the hardest hit jobs are administration (61% of organisations were planning cuts here) followed by sales (41%).

Given many 'diversity groups' are over-represented in administration roles, we need to keep our eye on this. Overseas, where the GFC has had longer to 'bite', statistics indicate that women are losing full-time jobs at twice the rate of men – UK employment statistics show the number of women in full-time work fell by 53,000 in the last quarter, compared with a fall of 36,000 for men. The current issue of *Forbes* magazine notes that, "72% of the missing workers laid off have been women, even though they constituted 64% of employment before the crash began."

While unemployment rates are moving, available research shows organisations here and overseas are thinking outside the box, looking beyond 'knee jerk' redundancy reactions. Such organisations want to avoid losing the benefits of many years' hard work spent attracting and retaining high performing talent – if they can retain the skills base of their workforce, they will be in a better position to compete when the economy picks up again. These organisations are thinking creatively, limiting redundancies and instead offering their staff a range of flexible working arrangements such as reduced working hours, sabbaticals, and using up accrued annual and long service leave entitlements.

In Australia, media reports indicate employers are doing the same. Nearly 90% of Kenworth Trucks' employees agreed to cut their working week to four days to clear leave entitlements, North Coast Ad Agency negotiated with staff for a reduction in working days, switching to a four-day week, closing the business on Fridays, while Intrepid Travel staff agreed to either a four-day week, unpaid leave or a 10% pay cut.

A car manufacturer is negotiating with a union to reduce workers' shifts, in an effort to retain skilled labour and provide workers with job security.

While the return on investment of such initiatives will not be known for some time, DCA know that the cost-benefits are clear in terms of reduced turnover and higher retention.

Where to from here? DCA argues that firstly, diversity must stay on the agenda. Diversity leaders in the US are setting the standard by ramping up their diversity efforts to take advantage of the buyer's market for talent and ensure their talent pipelines are strong.

Secondly, organisations should be focusing on how their diversity strategies can engage and retain high performing talent to ensure their investment in attracting such staff is not laid to waste.

Thirdly, organisations should focus on flexibility capacity building for their managers, given the key role flexibility appears to be playing in assisting organisations to respond to the GFC.

Lastly, continuing to monitor the impact of the economic downturn on the diversity agenda in the Australian business context is critical and DCA is working with its members to do this.

Nareen Young is Chief Executive Officer of [Diversity Council Australia](#). Diversity Council Australia is the independent, not-for-profit diversity advisor to business and provides diversity advice and strategy to over 100 organisations, many of whom are Australia's biggest employers.