

Sexism is not a race issue

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The federal Coalition, some state Labor governments and the corporate media have been justifying racist policies by claiming they are defending women's rights. This argument has been one of several "justifications" for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and for why we should all be worried about refugee arrivals.

The NSW Labor government, the Coalition parties and the establishment media deliberately racialised some appalling gang rapes in western Sydney in 2005. This created the environment in which the Cronulla rioters felt comfortable arguing that they were on the beach to "protect our [white] women".

While these gang rapes were terrible and premeditated, the government's reaction meant that the rapes were condemned as race-based, instead of being about women's rights. Other gang rapes in Sydney at the time didn't attract the same media coverage.

While the media and government complained that the rapists did not have "Australian values" (about protecting women), in fact, the rapists had grown up in Australia and absorbed its sexist culture and ideas.

The NSW Rape Crisis Centre believes that the racialisation of the gang rapes is making women believe that if they stay clear of men from Middle Eastern backgrounds they will be safe. The centre cited the case of a 19-year-old TAFE student who was raped by four men in business suits, who had been drinking outside an inner-city pub she walked past. She wasn't worried when they followed her because they were Anglo-Saxon in appearance, like herself. Yet the men dragged her into a vacant schoolyard and raped her.

The NSW Rape Crisis Centre says that women are being gang raped most weekends, yet the media is interested only when there is an "ethnic element".

Similarly, in response to Sheikh Taj al-din Hilali's sexist musings about women last year, the government and right-wing shock jocks turned the issue into one about "Islam", not the sexist remarks.

At around the same time, the Anglican archbishop of Perth and a Christian fundamentalist minister in Warnambool made similarly sexist remarks, but there was no hue and cry. Hilali's remarks should have been condemned, not because he is a Muslim preacher, but because all sexist remarks should be condemned, regardless of who makes them. Racialising sexism does nothing to advance women's rights.

The Howard government's latest attempt to whip up racism revolves around proposing that migrants answer a quiz about "Australian values" before they can become citizens. One of the questions is about the "Australian value" of equality of women with men.

The Coalition government's use of arguments about the need to defend women's rights in order to

whip up racism against Muslims and people of Arabic or South Asian backgrounds (who supposedly support the oppression of women) is utter hypocrisy when it is so busily attacking all women's right to economic independence and equality.

Likewise, the government's sudden interest in domestic violence in Aboriginal communities is hypocritical given its long refusal to provide adequate funds for domestic violence services.

The problem of domestic and sexual violence, combined with substance addiction, is a serious one. But the Coalition's response and the media reporting of it create the impression that such violence only takes place in Aboriginal communities, or among Muslim and Arabic or South Asian communities. The facts show that this is a lie, but the focus on reporting violence against women in Aboriginal communities is useful for the government by building a picture of dysfunctional communities, which helps it to justify a harsher law-and-order approach.

P.S.

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