

"The Not-So-Generic Woman in Higher Education"

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As a woman of Armenian background I could be described as being from a: LOTE (language other than English background), NESB (non-English speaking background), woman of colour, from ethno-cultural, ethno-linguistic diversity or ethno-racial minority.

I am an Egyptian born Armenian migrant, being part of the Armenian Diaspora in Egypt and come from a working class background. My family came out in the early 1960's during the time of White Australia Policy. When in my 6th Grade my class teacher and school principal announced in front of my class that if I didn't repeat Grade 6 I would always struggle with my education. Fortunately my mother did not agree with her and supported me to continue onto high school. Despite the principal's firm belief that I was destined for failure, here I am.

If we are to represent a more equitable image of woman in higher education we need to articulate differences in access and representation that exist for Indigenous women, women from ethno-racial minorities, women with a disability, and lesbian women.

Using the term 'women' generically as an equity target group is troublesome and I believe well passed its use-by date. It most often suggests white Anglo Saxon, heterosexual, women unless specifically articulated otherwise. It does not make transparent differences to access, opportunity and representation based on our cultural diversity. You don't have to look too closely at the figures to understand that higher education is not a level playing field for all women.

I am planning to talk about the importance of acknowledging the social hierarchical differences between 'women' in terms of access and representation in higher education. I will be specifically looking at UTS demographics to make comparisons of access and representation of women from language other than English backgrounds compared to white Anglo European women- what I describe as the more generically identified group under 'women'.

In this paper I also want to acknowledge the gradual broadening of vocabulary used to identify our rich cultural diversity in Australia, although NESB (non English speaking background) or LOTE (language background other than English) tend to be terms more frequently used within the tertiary sector.

I will include the terms 'ethno-racial minority' and 'women of colour' intermittently as I feel they more accurately represent differences in social privilege and social acceptance that exist between these women and women from Anglo-European backgrounds that are also classified as NESB or LOTE. While you could say we're all women of colour – I want to differentiate this from woman 'generic', which I believe tends to represent whiteness. I feel this is a sensitive and difficult subject to speak about as there are such fine delineations to equity. eg. it is very difficult to speak only of ethno-cultural or ethno-linguistic diversity without acknowledging differences in class and socio economic status and the differences experienced by these women in their countries of origin as well as in Australia.

The category of 'women' needs to be deconstructed to reveal the dimensions of power and privilege, access and representation. When we speak of 'women' at forums, meetings, committees and conferences such as this – the immediate question that comes to my mind is 'which women?' In a forum such as this the politics of voice is crucial. Some voices from the apparently same equity group may appear to struggle and contest within and between groups to produce a speaking position.

“The struggle is both to overcome silence or marginality, and against stereotypic misrepresentation.”¹ This could be described as deep democracy within the equity group of women. I see deep democracy as a post democratic ideal that looks at the more marginalised voice in any group that has a mainstream. The ones that may not get represented in a majority group. Deep democracy is a model that promotes consensus based on awareness of the relationship between groups or individuals that don't always share equal power in the mainstream. It's also an attempt to challenge our thinking and notice our ease when we are part of the majority or the mainstream.

There are real differences in the personal power we may each express and experience as women of colour and the differences in structural power in the institutions in which we work. To challenge and engage in critical debate of the structural power differences as Equity Practitioners I would like to raise the following questions:

When we say “Which Women”?

Who are we representing?

Who comes to our Women's committees?

Who is represented on our selection panels?

Who is not represented? Are they invisible? Absent? Or unheard?

How are they represented in their gender/racial based collectives?

Who represents the invisible ones?

Are those who speak representative of the ones who are not there?

The argument of “we're the same – we're all women oppressed by patriarchy” - carries the belief that sexism is more fundamental than racism, “in the sense that sexual identity is more important in determining social status than racial identity.”²

Sameness is represented as the norm and implies that sameness equates being and thinking like the mainstream or – being white. Sameness is a ‘myth’ – since sameness has required giving up who we are as women of colour and Indigenous women, in order to fit into the norm – with the subtext being who we are, our difference, is currently not an equal to whiteness. Another way of describing this norm is to see it in terms of ‘consensus reality’.

The perceived or ‘consensus reality’ reflected within our institutions is one that tends to reflect white, able-bodied, middle class, heterocentric male beliefs and Calvinistic, Judeo-Christian values as the optimum experience. This lack of awareness and acknowledgment of difference is one of the fundamental foundations for indirect and direct racial discrimination in our institutions.

White women's struggle for equality has implicitly meant equality with white men, which in practical terms has also meant greater access and representation for more senior positions in the University hierarchy. “But the demand to be equal to white men is necessarily a demand to achieve ‘whiteness’, a status that depends on racist structures of social relations for its power and autonomy.”³

Adrienne Rich wrote:

¹ Pettman 1992, 123

² Alcoff 1999, 5

³ Alcoff 1999, 6 (Frye 1992)

“I believe that white feminists today, raised white in a racist society, are often ridden with white solipsism – not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term continuing momentum or political usefulness.”⁴

⁴ Ware 1992, 1979, 306

To raise awareness of our difference requires sometimes to speak out against sameness, to move beyond shame or blame and ask where to next and how to? This is something that tends to be mostly practiced or most prominent on the agenda of women who are experiencing the marginalisation. Awareness seems to diminish as women in the mainstream move into more senior positions. It may even be said that it is in the interest of some white women not to speak up and in a sense maintain a position of power. Gloria Joseph argues that “white women are both tools and benefactors of racism, and that feminists must recognise and address white women’s social position as both oppressors and oppressed.”⁵

The main privilege of belonging to a majority position is not having to be aware of how it excludes those that are marginalised. In her exercise on blue eyed/brown eyed, anti-racism trainer, Jane Elliott demonstrates how good it feels, to be the majority, to have your best interests acknowledged and represented. In her fairly tough exercise on how racism operates she found that the blue-eyed people were overwhelmingly unable/unwilling to tolerate the oppressive treatment they received from her over a relatively short period of time. She was quick to point out that marginalised groups experience similar behaviour from the mainstream everyday of their lives.

When differences are not in our consciousness, raising them can sometimes come as a jolt and polarise women from ethno-racial minority backgrounds as disturbers who are unwilling to support the ‘cause’, who are the bearers of bad news and who are somehow ungracious for what they have been given.

⁵ Alcoff 1999, 5 1981

I remember speaking up for the inclusion of women of ethno-racial diversity and Indigenous women at a forum revising the Affirmative Action Act a couple of years back. The Act had a couple of token paragraphs respectively for women from NESB and Indigenous women – there was nothing written on the differences of opportunity and representation for these women.

The speaker I addressed at the time was Susan Ryan who had drafted the original Affirmative Action Act with Gareth Evans – and who, throughout her talk referred to women from NESB as non English speaking women. I stood up and said that whilst I was from an ethno-racial minority background, I had lived in Australia for the past 35 years and spoke English very well. I asked her why there had not been any inclusion of the specific differences between white women and women from ethno-racial minorities and Indigenous women. Her response to me was that the Act was not large enough to include women of diversity and she recommended more or less that these groups should really write their own. What was even more concerning was that no one else spoke up in the room on this issue.

This example demonstrates the way that women from minority groups become repeatedly marginalised for their difference and are positioned in their culturally specific groups. Any projects that specifically focus on these women are seen as 'special' funding (which tends to be limited and short term). Funding cuts in the tertiary sector tend to affect the most marginalised equity groups, where 'specialist' programs are increasingly becoming more mainstreamed. This is certainly the experience in our University where we no longer have an Aboriginal Employment Strategy Co-ordinator. Minorities or lower represented groups need support to voice their opinions and for their opinions to be represented. It is not just their responsibility to do so.

Critical questions around Equity and the Not-So-Generic woman:

How do/could dominant group women address their whiteness and their privileged access to cultural capital?

How are they placed in terms of race and culture?

What does acknowledging class and ethno-cultural differences do to feminism?

How does it affect our programs and policies as Equity Practitioners?

In her paper at the 1998 Winds of Change Conference, Angela Leitch wrote: "What is needed for Aboriginal women to succeed as staff in a University environment is to have programs that deal with both race and gender. Affirmative action programs need to address the complexities of society. They currently assume sharp distinction between black and white, male and female rather than recognising the layering of these categories."⁶

⁶ Leitch 1999, 124 (Behrendt 1997, 110)

At the University of Technology we have a 36% NESB student population and 24% of total staff speak a first language other than English.⁷ It is the first year that we have layered the category for LOTE (language other than English background) with a gender breakdown for our annual report to ODEOPE. I was excited by this as it showed very clearly differences that I knew existed for a long time – but were never articulated in any of our reports. I also believe that knowledge of these figures carry with them a certain responsibility. In preparing this paper I wanted to compare our figures with those from other Universities. I sent email notices to some of the University networks including the EOPHEA email string, asking for dual figures in both language and gender breakdown. I was pleased by the willing response from other Equity practitioners, however was disappointed to find that on the whole such figures are not kept. And in some cases – no figures are kept? I also contacted DETYA and ODEOPE without much luck.

It was not a surprise to find that while the figures show increased representation of women in senior positions both academically and generally these figures drop for women coming from Language backgrounds other than English. Similar breakdowns have not been made for ATSI and women with disability but I imagine the figures would be comparable in their differences.

Demographics

What I found most obvious from looking at the figures from UTS was the hierarchical pattern of occupational segmentation for staff from LOTE and in particular women from LOTE. For example:

The highest proportions of support staff from LOTE for 1998 are employed at levels 4 and 5. Female staff comprises 75% of all respondents at level 3, 67% at level 4 and 71% at level 5. These are mostly clerical, administrative and secretarial positions. Only 5% of LOTE support staff respondents are employed at the most senior classification of level 9 and 10 and above. Of this figure women from LOTE make an aggregate figure of 28% at levels 9 & 10. Comparatively, women's (generic) representation at HEW level 10 in 1998 was 46%. There have also been slight increases to women's representation at levels 7 and 8. The ODEOPE report writes that increases to these more senior levels for women have been attributed to the "University's concerted effort over a number of years to promote an organisational culture inclusive of women's participation at senior levels, and to a sustained program of career development for women."⁸ Again it begs the question - 'which women'?

Similar trends appear within academic positions. Whilst 34% of UTS academic staff are women, this is reduced to 11% for women from LOTE. This figure has increased from 6% in 1996. We can only speculate the reasons for the increase as there haven't been any proactive programs targeting women from LOTE: It could be that more LOTE women respondents were completing the voluntary EEO data survey on commencement at UTS. Or that there has been an increase in the rate of both the application for vacancies and the number of LOTE women recruited into academic positions.

A strong factor to these speculations is the increased casualisation of academic labour at UTS – with 88% of all fractional staff being women.

Representation also varies greatly in faculties – where some faculties have doubled their representations and other have had zero representation of staff from LOTE in the last triennium.

⁷ UTS ODEOPE report 1998, 34

⁸ ODEOPE 1999, 55

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

One of the more obvious way of addressing differences in access and representation for women of colour, Indigenous women and women with a disability is Affirmative Action programs that “include quotas in their programs, something which Australians have tended to steer away from in recruitment. It brings up the old argument that it would go against the Affirmative Action principle of recruitment based on **merit**.”⁹ Merit has been raised as a problematic concept as it suggests that those who made it – who rose to the top or even the middle did so off their own steam and those who didn’t only have themselves to blame. It carries the assumption that those who haven’t made it haven’t tried hard enough, didn’t enter into the right networks, etc.

As Sandra Harding puts it: “there is no leverage supplied by race/ethnicity, class, ability” and the combinations of these with gender. This perspective suggests that there is **no** problem with inequality and that it was never a problem. Inequality is “a natural consequence of individual aptitude and action.”¹⁰

It reflects a belief that “We’re all individuals and we rise and fall on our own.” It’s comes from a very Western patriarchal paradigm which carries an excessive emphasis on individualism and denies the inequities that exist within and between the collective groups that we identify with. It also denies our dependency on each other within our communities. It is particularly troublesome when individuals in marginalised groups are seen as representative of their collective – “so that the demerits of the individual are somehow transmitted to the whole group.”¹¹

⁹ Leitch, 1999, 124

¹⁰ Harding 1999, 118

¹¹ Harding 1999, 118

As Angela Leitch puts it, the underlying belief is that subsequently “the workplace would end up with a lot of unskilled and incompetent black people working alongside skilled and competent white people, and that would be detrimental to good race relations.”¹²

It implies that all members of these groups are somehow unworthy and this brings a disturbing biological reasoning to bear.”¹³ It does not consider the social hierarchy between white men and white women and the equally hierarchical difference between white women, women of colour and Indigenous women. There is no objective place to stand and no even playing field. “People are located at positions in the socioeconomic hierarchy as much by their gender, race/ethnicity and class and the hierarchies within these combinations as they are by their individual merits.”¹⁴

Harding says that to “judge on ‘merit’ is a nonsense as not all groups have a chance to be equally meritorious.”¹⁵ Recruitment based on merit is not just about the applicants; it is also about who does the recruiting. Who is on the panel, which cultural group does it represent? While a gender and culturally diverse selection panel is considered the optimum in our University’s recruitment practices – Is it one that is most often placed into practice and placed as a priority? Or not? If not, why not?

When looked at in terms of change within our organisational culture it raises some important questions around differences between personal and organisational culture:

Who benefits the most from an ideology that does not recognise difference or the necessity to change? Who set’s the standards, the policies and rules that support sameness? Whose responsibility is it to change the culture of an organisation when there is little cross over between personal and organisational culture?

NEXT STEPS INDICATORS OF CHANGE

The next steps for change require **all** women to be co-responsible to make changes within our institutional hierarchies. Change needs to be reflected in our:

- language,
- planned in consultation with representative target groups
- programs and policies,
- qualitative and quantitative targets,
- Action Plans,
- Annual reports,
- our selection processes and selection panels
- monitored qualitatively and quantitatively through our performance indicators.

Conclusion

Our figures clearly demonstrate that access and representation is not a level playing field for all women. I feel the current generic term ‘women’ tends to run the risk of limiting representation to white middle class women only when these differences aren’t specifically articulated. It is

¹² Leitch 1999, 124

¹³ Harding 1999, 118

¹⁴ Harding 1999, 119

¹⁵ Harding 1999, 119

imperative that these point are included and minuted in agendas in our committees, forums and conferences involving women in a way that formally recognises these differences beyond rhetoric.

The structure of hierarchy is created in a way that keeps women of colour and Indigenous women from accessing the same opportunities for access and representation that their white female colleagues have. It is my experience that women with a high difference either through their race, ethnicity or disability, face more challenges and may have to give up more to work/study in a tertiary institution but also have the potential to contribute new and diverse qualities.

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