

Keynote: Women's Studies in 2019 in Aotearoa/New Zealand

RACHEL SIMON-KUMAR

Address to the Women's Studies Association AGM, October 2019

It is just over 12 months since we met for the last Women's Studies Association Annual General Meeting in Wellington, and as I started writing this talk, I reflected on what – and in fact, how much – had changed since then in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I also reflected on what implications these changes hold for women's studies and by the same token, how women's studies might contribute to the changes unfolding before us.

The singular event that has upended life for us here as we know it is, of course, the Christchurch attacks. The murders of 51 Muslim New Zealanders and non-New Zealanders, in the most callous of ways, shocked us beyond anything we could have imagined. Its aftermath brought out the best in us – our ability to show fierce solidarity, to stand up for a much-maligned community, and to give generously. Yet, while the March attacks highlighted the goodness of Aotearoa/New Zealand society, it also raised questions about some of our entrenched biases and how these might be implicated in the horrors of that day.

Why is all this important from a women's studies perspective? The March 15 attacks reinforce to us the gendered nature and consequences of domestic terrorism. That a group was targeted for being 'different' and Other – to fulfil accumulated and cumulative hate – has important ramifications and tells us that we must re-engage urgently with the discourses and the realities of difference.

Feminism has long engaged with 'difference'; in fact, in some ways, feminism, attuned to the complexity of social relationships, has led the way in thinking about difference. The events at Christchurch are an occasion to reinvigorate our understanding of difference and diversity contextualised specifically here in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

So, what lessons might we draw from the March 15 attacks? Firstly, Christchurch highlights the tyranny of white supremacy. An idea that lay on the fringes of our imaginations and our political reflections just a few years ago has taken centrefold place in recent times both globally and in Aotearoa/New Zealand more strongly since Christchurch. For a long while, we lulled ourselves into thinking that identifying and combatting things like racism, discrimination, institutional racism, or even the more vapid and seriously understated term 'unconscious bias' would suffice to understand how power is unevenly distributed among people who are racially and ethnically different. White supremacy dispels that myth.

White supremacy is intertwined with gender and sexuality. It is a male discourse, and a heterosexual discourse as much as a race discourse. White supremacy erases difference – anything or anyone that does not conform to its narrow view of who might exist in the world. It is a discourse that is not just embraced by a few on the fringes of society – far from it, white supremacy is mainstreamed in leadership, in our economy, and in the very democratic institutions that are supposed to stave off its menace. It is perversely embedded in what we (as feminists) consider to be sacred – freedoms of speech, freedom to act politically and

collectively, and freedom to communicate diverse ideas. White supremacy has infiltrated academia in the guise of dialogue and erudition, as just ‘another plausible point of view’.

Our challenge in these times is to understand its meteoric and breathtakingly rapid rise, why feminists didn’t see its impending threat of emergence, and how we confront and eradicate this disease.

Second, Christchurch also highlighted women’s leadership. Yes, Jacinda Ardern, her image reflected on the Burj Khalifa, and her narrative of compassion and kindness was, and is, a striking contrast to the male leadership of divisiveness that so permeates both the western and non-western world today. But it is not just *her* platform of leadership that we must recognise.

From the Muslim community came leadership – women who were at the coal face of community grief, of being the liaison, the public and media spokespersons, of deliberations with the government, of writing submissions, of endless and endless meeting, and of challenging policy and law. I am thinking of women like Anjum Rahman and Aliya Danzisen, who have worked tirelessly representing the anguish of communities, all the while facing the indifference of those in power.

But hearteningly, I also notice other women of colour standing up in leadership in recent times. There were some women of colour who stood for the local elections held across the country in October. As our population diversifies, having ethnic women in leadership is vital, as they bring insight into the worlds of the most marginalised, even among the marginalised. If we are fortunate, we might see a radical reshaping of political institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the future, one that is diverse in colour and gender.

There is a role for us as feminists here. As a collective, we must challenge the barriers to ethnic women’s leadership. There is a role here especially for white feminists – to make, energise, and clear space for women of colour to emerge and take up leadership roles.

Leadership in democratic politics is not stand-alone – there is a long history of ethnic women’s leadership within specialised community and NGO sectors, but it has not really been allowed to expand beyond that. I wonder, for example, how many ethnic women are on boards (that flagship initiative of the Ministry for Women) of companies, of universities, of the public sector, of philanthropic organisations.

We have an opportunity to invest in building ethnic gendered leadership capacity in bureaucracy and in the private sector. And we must get behind it.

Third, what was so apparent in the aftermath of Christchurch was that Muslim women were disproportionately and differently affected. Women who lost their husbands often lost the sole breadwinner, perhaps also the principal person in the family with the legal right to reside in the country. Many didn’t know how to drive a car, couldn’t go shopping, couldn’t manage negotiating the interactions with government or banks or other agencies.

We often talk about ‘differences’ among women as if they are only identities. What we need to remember is that there are also material differences associated with those identities. We know so little about the everyday material, political, and social consequences of being ‘different’ women. We need information, data, and research, particularly empowering research – not that which victimises or exoticises ethnic women’s differences, but to understand the various material realities of those who are often invisible. A while back I did a quick search for research about ethnic women/Asian women that is being done in Aotearoa/New Zealand – the results were dispiritingly scanty.

There is little surprise there – how many university courses actually teach about Aotearoa/New Zealand’s gendered diversity that encourage more students to take up research on ethnic women? For that matter, how many ethnic women academics do we have on the rolls in universities? Worryingly few.

Fourth, another point I'd like to note is that ethnic people need a constitutional space. There needs to be a legitimate thread in the narratives that bind us as New Zealanders – in her histories, in her politics, and in her social and physical landscape. This legitimacy is something that has been evading the 'other ethnic' communities for a long time. Terms such as 'migrant', 'new settler/newcomer', which have been used to describe non-Māori, non-Pākehā suggest transience, a guest, a visitor, almost an interloper, and a gatecrasher. Not just tau iwi, but tau iwi among tau iwi.

In current public discourse, the migrant community faces a conundrum. They cannot be the majority or 'universal' Kiwi – they are too different. Yet, they cannot claim the status of marginality either because their difference is not different enough, not legitimate enough.

The tensions of difference – the 'politics of difference' – is an area that has been extensively debated within feminism since the 1980s. How might we make space for differences – not to equalise all difference, but to redefine political identity in ways that acknowledge equivalence among differences?

Studded in feminist theory are some answers – for example, Black feminists talk of intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression, or the post-Marxist writings of Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young, the post-structuralist work of Chantal Mouffe, or post-colonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak come to mind. They remind us that feminism is not only about staking claims for identities that are different, but about recognising that oppressions are shared and linked, are structural in nature – and that we can (and must) draw together our different identities in strategic ways to build strategic alliances and coalitions.

In these times, as differences become the normalised leitmotif of societies, we must more than ever recognise that we face common enemies – based not only on identities (gender, sexualities, or race) but also structures of society, government, and economy that culminate in shared outcomes of inequality, inequity, poverty, discrimination, and so on.

I am reminded of what I read in the days following the March attacks – as Māori communities came out to help the Muslim communities, they pointedly noted, 'mosque today, marae tomorrow'.

Hate – of the kind we are seeing today – doesn't distinguish among differences. It is activism based on alliances that will see us through these times.

Finally, what Christchurch teaches us is that, contradictory as it sounds, as much as we should recognise difference, we should also normalise it. They are us. It is the inability to see the commonalities – that the stories of others are the stories of us – that can lead to alienation, and as we have seen, can also lead to violence.

I am still waiting for the day when we see a hijab-clad newsreader on our TV screens, or perhaps playing netball, or singing the anthem for the All Blacks.

As we start a new decade next year – the year 2020 – let us take this opportunity to reflect on how we might prioritise our thinking, our praxis, and our activism of feminism and women's studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

What lessons of inclusion, of commonalities, of shared spirit – of a common sisterhood – can we resurrect for these times of differences?

There is an urgency before us. We cannot afford to ignore it and continue business as usual.

RACHEL SIMON-KUMAR is Associate Professor in the School of Population Health, University of Auckland. Her research covers topics in gender, diversity, health, and policy.