SEXUAL ASSAULT:
A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

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THE FOCUS OF THIS PAPER IS ON RESPONSE RATHER THAN PREVENTION, and the emphasis is on society's response to marginalised groups—the response to victims/survivors of rape and sexual assault who are members of non-dominant groups; that is, those who do not experience the privileges attached to being white, middle/upper class, English speaking, and of Anglo-Saxon cultural background.

Males were not included in that list since rape and sexual assault is a gender issue. The majority of perpetrators are male, and the majority of victims/survivors are female. Women's experience of violence is rooted in patriarchy and capitalism. The competitive and materialistic nature of capitalism, with profit as its core value, provides an environment where exploitative relationships flourish. Studies show that in our society, rape and sexual assault is more likely to occur within the context of pre-existing relationships rather than through one-off contact with a stranger, and so it often remains a private rather than a public crime (Sydney Rape Crisis Centre 1984). This exemplifies women's less powerful position within a patriarchal system. It is only through deconstructing patriarchy and capitalism that the question of prevention of violence against women can be answered. However, it is the issue of society's response to victims/survivors from the non-dominant culture, particularly women from non-English speaking backgrounds, which are addressed in this paper.

As a Chilean woman living in Australia since 1974, and after working for many years in women's services and migrant welfare services in Queensland, the author can readily state that the response is less than desirable. The marginalisation of women from non-Anglo cultural, non-English speaking backgrounds in society generally, is reflected at all levels in the provision of welfare services and within the legal system.

To understand this process of marginalisation we must go back historically and honestly analyse and understand the process of colonisation of the Aboriginal people by the British, and then look at the policies of successive governments in controlling subsequent migration and in dealing with the settlement of those newer migrants. Until the 1970s, Australia's
immigration selection policy was racially exclusive, and even today definitions of who is a desirable migrant, who is assimilable and who is to be defined as 'other', inform the immigration debate and related disputes about multiculturalism (Jakubowicz 1985). Marginalisation of people from the non-dominant culture has been an integral part of Australia's social and political systems then since 1788.

Australia is not alone in this of course. As Allen (1986, p. 6) writes about the American Indian woman:

For the abuse of Indian women and children by Indian men can be traced to the introduction into Indian culture of alcohol and Christianity. The message of the conquerors was that female subservience was the will of God . . . The devaluation of women that has accompanied Christianization and Americanization is not simply a matter of loss of or shift in status. It also entails a rise in victimization of women by men.

The force with which colonisers repress indigenous cultures around the world and the perpetuation of this repression by patriarchal capitalism, have led to dramatic levels of violence—particularly rape, sexual assault and sexual exploitation—both within and against indigenous communities. The response by policy makers indicates not only the lack of priority given to indigenous communities, but also the lack of political will regarding self-determination, and a lack of knowledge about how else to deal with this violence.

For Australian residents and citizens from non-English speaking backgrounds, the message to assimilate to the ways of the dominant culture was clearly spelled out up to the early 1970s, in spite of the impossibility of this expectation. Identity, perception, and values are culturally determined. How can one divorce one's self from one's previous cultural influences, or from the experiences and influences of one's formative years? Later policies of integration and today's multiculturalism, while adopting a more enlightened approach, have not incorporated sufficient infrastructure to achieve their stated goals of a society in which resources and services are equally accessible to its ethnic minorities. More than this, as Jakubowicz (1985) and others state, the policy of multiculturalism does not sufficiently address class and gender issues to enable any real structural change to occur.

The policy outlined in the Commonwealth government's National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia states that all Australians have the right to equality of treatment and opportunity and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth. In terms of the services provided by government itself, it means designing and delivering those programs in ways which reflect the needs, characteristics and circumstances of their intended clients, so that equal access and equitable entitlement are assured (Australia. Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 1989, p. vii).

The access and equity strategy which forms a significant part of the policy of multiculturalism is presently being evaluated by the Office of Multicultural Affairs. One of the community-based, government funded programs evaluated revealed an appalling lack of awareness of the strategy and very little effort to implement any policies or strategies to ensure that particular community-based program's accessibility and relevance to non-English speaking background communities in Queensland.

From working in women's services in Queensland, the author knows that the same situation exists. In spite of the valiant efforts of a few people, the services predominantly
remain unknown to the vast majority of non-English speaking background women, do not have staff or management committees which reflect the cultural diversity existing in Australian society, and remain predominantly Anglo-Australian in their approach to service delivery. For a female, non-English speaking background victim/survivor of rape or sexual assault, this generally translates to an experience of assistance from health, welfare and legal services that can include language barriers, complete ignorance of the cultural implications of her assault, patronisation, racial stereotyping, and sometimes overt racism. This, in effect, often prevents a woman from a non-English speaking background from speaking out about her assault, seeking out support, and from receiving appropriate support.

For example a Filipino woman's culturally-based emotional response when speaking to police, doctors, and in court about being raped meant that she smiled and even laughed. For her this was to overcome the sorrow, shame, and embarrassment she felt and to enable her to 'save face' in front of strangers. It was only when she was home alone that she cried and dealt with her anger and grief. However, the police, doctors and courts interpreted her smiles and laughter as meaning that it was not a particularly traumatic experience for her and that she must have even enjoyed it to some extent.

The same woman also faced a supposed 'credibility' problem as she knew her attacker and because she took too long after the rape in reporting it. The fact was she had extremely limited knowledge of the welfare and legal system and this, combined with her speaking a language other than English, simply meant it took her a lot longer to find out how to find help and to whom to report her attack.

Another woman, an African who had suffered rape by the military in her home country, was then raped by her husband in Australia. She was so isolated in Australia, with no knowledge of where or how to obtain help, that she burnt herself, presumably to find a way out of her trauma.

Many community-based services in Queensland still do not serve people from non-English speaking backgrounds. As soon as they hear an accent or a language other than English they refer straight away to a migrant welfare service regardless of the particular issue, even if the issue is in an area in which they specialise—such as tenancy, or problems with the police.

Recently, a Family Court judge said to a Chinese-speaking woman who was in a violent marriage: 'You have been here for two years now—you should not need an interpreter'. Therefore, no interpreter was made available to this woman.

There have been many instances when women have complained about staff in both medical and legal services using their children to interpret rather than arranging for an appropriately accredited interpreter. The intimate nature of health problems and the powerful position in which this places the child means this practice merely serves to exacerbate the woman's difficulties rather than to assist her.

In rural areas of northern Queensland, many refuge and crisis workers are not even aware of the Telephone Interpreter Service.

Then there is the situation where the feminist/progressive' service invites a woman from non-English speaking background or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander woman onto their management committee, or employs one in their organisation, but does nothing to orientate her, or facilitate her participation into all aspects of the service. The isolation she experiences then leads her to leave the service and to state that 'we tried but it was too hard; it did not work; she did not fit in'. The emphasis is thus placed on the woman's inability to fit
in rather than on the service's inability to develop an integrated and structured approach to access and equity.

Services will content themselves with employing someone from a fourth-generation Middle-Eastern background, for example, or a recent arrival from England, as their token migrant worker. This misses the point entirely about the barriers facing immigrant and refugee women from non-English speaking backgrounds. As Rahman (1989, p. 1) states:

Racism is not just the blatant violence of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Racism is the subtle and not so subtle. It masquerades as an 'oversight', a 'slip of the tongue', a snub, a failure to get a promotion, etc. It is patronising and condescending, elitist and aloof.

All health, welfare and legal services must develop policies to enable accessible and relevant service provision. Such policies should address issues of language and interpreting, equal employment opportunities for women from the non-dominant culture, training in cross-cultural awareness and skill development for staff and management at all levels. Effective access and equity involve a comprehensive and integrated approach to programming and management, not a tokenistic approach.

But why should we expect this when a capitalist society has structural inequality as an inherent feature? How can services respond in an egalitarian way to diversity when they form part of a welfare system which aids in maintaining social class and gender inequalities? The welfare industry itself is female dominated, yet industrial conditions prevalent in the industry provide another illustration of gender inequality.

Despite these contradictions we do expect services to respond in a proper way. Services must not simply reproduce the inequality, they must challenge it. Community-based organisations in particular, have this role.

Multiculturalism, while an advance on former policies, has had little impact in practical terms on the lives of those most marginalised, namely the indigenous population and the immigrant working class. The social inequalities which impact on the immigrant working class are not just related to the cultural monopolisation of social resources. They include class and economic inequalities.

The interrelationship between gender, race and class, cannot be ignored. By focussing on only one difference—ethnicity—the policy fails to acknowledge and address other significant differences, particularly class differences. In the same way, the women's movement, by focussing upon the oppression of women, is usually guilty of ignoring the differences amongst the world's women—race, ethnicity, language, class, age, sexuality. As Audre Lorde (1984, p.114) states:

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematised oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanised inferior. Within this society that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.

An intolerance of difference has become entrenched in our institutions primarily because of the necessity to use so-called 'outsiders' as labour in our profit-oriented economy. Our
socialisation within this system has conditioned us to respond to difference with fear and to manage difference in one of three ways:

ignore it, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion (Lorde 1984, p. 115).

Whilst there are real differences between people of race, age, gender and class, it is not the differences themselves which separate us, but the way in which we deal with them (Lorde 1984, p. 115). Too often, we as individuals, and as a society at large, operate from the belief that those differences are insurmountable barriers, or on the other hand that they do not exist at all.

Real change must occur at both an individual and a structural level. As individuals, we must honestly acknowledge and come to understand the differences between us. Those who are privileged through being male, or educated, or wealthy, or part of the dominant cultural group must acknowledge that privilege. We must develop true regard for each other as equals and we must work towards addressing inequality through structural change. As Lorde, in her interpretation of Paulo Freire, states, we must recognise:

that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, and the oppressors' relationships (Lorde 1984, p. 123).

At a structural level, we must continue to ask how to achieve a participatory, empowering, non-racist, and non-sexist social system. Otherwise, we will fail in our responsibility, and the public response to all victims/survivors of rape and sexual assault will remain less than adequate.

To conclude, the following is a short poem from a Chilean woman from the Poblacion, Clara Estrella. The poem is titled Todas ibamos a ser reinas which translated means 'We were all going to be Queens'.

**Todas ibamos a ser reinas**

Lucha, siempre lucha, por un mundo mejor; igualdad de condiciones, por la justicia y la verdad, por la vida y el amor por la libertad.

Ten presente que cuando cedas, para ti, el mundo se va a acabar, sin mas.

**We Were All Going to be Queens**

Struggle, struggle always, for a better world: for equality of conditions, for justice and for truth, for life and love for liberty.

Remember that if you give up the world for you will end, without notice.
**Bibliography**


