

DR ANNE ALY MP  
MEMBER FOR COWAN

EMILY'S LIST 2016 ORATION  
THE WODEN TRADIES, CANBERRA  
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Good evening everyone.

It's an honour to be here tonight to deliver the Emily's List 2016 Oration, and thank you Tanya for the kind introduction. I'd also like to say a big warm welcome to the girls from Lanyon High School and Harrison School!

We are meeting tonight on the ancestral lands of the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge the First Australians as the traditional custodians of this continent, whose cultures are among the oldest living cultures in human history. I pay respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

I'm truly humbled to be invited to address a room of such strong women, just as Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Dr Anne Summers - two women I very much admire - have done in the past.

Now before I start, I must admit something: I am only a very new member of Emily's List (and the Labor Party for that matter). Politics and political machinations are not my areas of expertise.

I can't talk with much authority on the rich history of Emily's List or the achievements that you have won both inside and out of the Labor Party.

What I intend to do is look forward. To talk about how the feminist movement in Australia can work for all women.

This is particularly important to me as a minority woman who has at times felt left out, let down or ignored by Western feminism.

Not by purpose or intention, but because Western feminism has tended to view women like me as lacking autonomy, as being uniformly oppressed and as women who need saving - from their men, from their religion, from their societies.

The fact is that societies and groups have always been judged by the status accorded to women. We (meaning the West) like to use our women as a yardstick of just how progressive we are because, you know, we let women vote and stuff.

Many of you probably haven't heard about a woman named Huda Shaarawi. She is often cited as an Egyptian pioneer of feminism who revealed the restrictive world of upper class women in her book *The Harem Years*.

She was raised in the harem system which kept women secluded - as was common amongst elite Jewish, Christian and Muslim women in Egypt in the early 1900s.

She is famous for a lot of things in Egypt but is most well-known for a decision she made in 1923.

Stepping off a crowded train in downtown Cairo, she whipped her veil off in front of a huge crowd, flung it to the wind and declared that she would not continue to be a victim of a suppressive patriarchal regime.

I often emulate her whipping off my apron and declaring "I shall not be lectured to about sexism and

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misogyny by this man, not now, not ever.” But that’s just a fantasy. We’ll keep it between us, shall we?

Huda’s brave move that day inspired a feminist wave across the Arab world influencing millions of Arab women at a time when Australian women were also fighting for their rights.

Sure we’ve made big strides. We’ve had female heads of state in some Muslim majority countries and here in Australia – though the US is still to come to the party. But we still have so many small battles to win.

I would have been around six or seven when I first started to realise just how the circumstances of my birth affected expectations of me – as a woman, as a Muslim and as a minority.

I had been thinking – which is always a dangerous thing – this time I had been thinking about the meaning of life as you do when you’re 6 years old and don’t have a Barbie doll you can relate to.

I approached my mother who was busying herself in the kitchen to tell her about my new-found wisdom. I had figured that we were all just really asleep and that life was actually a dream that was constructed by our sleeping selves. If I had any vision I should have written it down because I could have sold it to Hollywood years later and had a film made about it and called it the Matrix.

My mother looked up momentarily from her onion peeling, cocked her head sideways and sternly remarked “Don’t think too much. You go crazy and nobody marry you.”

I came away with a keen sense of my life’s purpose: to not think in order to not go mad and hence attract a suitable life partner.

Growing up my mother would often repeat an Arabic phrase “dul el ragal wala dul el heit’. It sounds romantic, doesn’t it? Like something out of a Mills and Boon novel or a sappy Jennifer Aniston movie? Wait till you hear what it means.

It means the shade of a man is like the shade of a wall. Each time I tried to reach for the sunlight. Each time I refused another suitor. Each time I tried to leave my abusive husband, I was told that I could not. That I would wither and die in the sun. That I should stay in the shadows where I could be protected. That I did not belong in the light.

I came to hate that saying.

Many years and a few marriages later I found myself sitting around a boardroom table as the first woman appointed to an all-male board.

A funny thing happened that day. As the board was coming to a resolution on a matter, I offered my advice. I watched as the first male in the room agreed with me. Male number two agreed with male number 1. Male number 3 commended males number 1 and 2 on their intellect and agreed with them. Male number 4 thought male number 3 was the bees knees and so it went and by the time they had finished, all the men in the room were congratulating themselves and each other for their brilliant idea.

It was then that I discovered the incredible power that we women have. We are invisible.

Put us in a room full of alpha males and we don a magical cloak of invisibility. Believe me if I had the invisibility superpower there are a few things I would rather do with it.

I mention these two experiences – one as a girl child and one as an empowered grown woman – to demonstrate that for women like me, for those of us who are visibly different, who come from minority cultures, for women of colour, the challenges aren’t just about gender and a focus only on gender

excludes us from the feminist story in Australia.

I say this not to disparage the movement or to undermine the struggles of generations of strong women against great adversities, but because to achieve long-term equality we need a total recalibration of our efforts.

We need to reach out to communities across Australia to connect women, understand women of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities and religions, and build a stronger movement.

Too often I am told I must be quiet, a delicate flower, grateful for the equalities and opportunities afforded me because I live in Australia and not Saudi Arabia. Too often I am told that I should be happy that I even have a place at the table. Too often I am told by men that I should have stayed in the kitchen (not that I have ever really been in the kitchen and Betty Baker Perfect Homemaker I am not). Too often I am told not to get angry, not to be a diva, not to call out a nong when he is behaving like one.

If we are going to judge anyone based on the status of 'our women', let us first judge ourselves.

So here are the facts: disadvantage is stacked. In the workplace, in the community, in politics - it's stacked.

In America, for every dollar made by a man, the average woman makes 78 cents, black women make 64 cents and Hispanic women 54.

While there is no reliable data on racial differences in the gender pay gap in Australia - an issue in itself - I am sure we can acknowledge that women of colour are significantly more affected than white women.

In our community, we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are incarcerated more than white women. Per 100,000, Aboriginal women are incarcerated at a rate higher than any other group in this country.

We know that visibly different Muslim women (those who wear the hijab) face a level of vitriol on our streets. Almost daily I have young Muslim women telling me that they are scared to apply for jobs in case they get knocked back because they wear hijab.

And politically, we have made incredible strides to elect forty-two Labor women to Federal Parliament this year, or 44% of the Labor caucus.

But culturally and linguistically diverse women are still substantially missing.

Those are the facts. This is not an exercise in victimisation or blame. This is not a criticism of the feminist movement or its achievements.

This is an opportunity to build.

So...let's build.

We have worked hard. Through years of trials and tribulations, years of being called a "bitch" or "ruthless", years of being told we care too much about fashion or not enough - we have developed incredible strength, and resilience, and courage.

We have reached the Prime Minister's office.

But we have more work to do. We will never achieve true gender equality until the most marginalised among us can share in the success. For the measure of our moral core is to be found in how we treat our

most vulnerable minorities.

Yes, we must keep an eye to the fights ahead and agitate for more change. But we cannot continue to do so at the expense of women who are yet to experience our wins.

When women first won the vote, it was not for all women. We had to fight for that.

When women first entered the workforce, not all women were able. We had to fight for that.

Now, as women lead Governments, Unions, boardrooms and executive suites, we must fight for these opportunities for all women. We cannot leave anyone behind. We need to address the criticism of Western feminism as exclusive and exclusionary if we are to move forward.

So, what can we do?

First of all, we need to recognise that women like me don't need to be "saved" from oppression or "added" as an afterthought in the feminist movement.

We do not need to be liberated and we do not need to be culturally converted in order to be feminists. The cultural patriarchy that binds you, that creates glass ceilings and concrete walls, binds us too though we may experience it in different ways.

Recently on a radio show back in Perth, I was asked whether Australian Muslim women were treated as second-class citizens, and I think I summed it up pretty well:

*"The only time I walk ten steps behind my husband is when he is carrying my shopping bags to make sure he doesn't drop my shoes."*

I like to think my answer was equal parts truthful - David really does carry my shoes - and 'why would you ask me this question'?

So no, we don't need to be "saved".

And I'm going to be honest: we don't want to be "included" in the wider movement either.

There are many different types of feminism. My mother, despite her adherence to cultural norms and practices became a director of nursing, was the primary bread winner in our household and is a formidable matriarch who often credits my own strength to her parenting telling me that I am strong like her but that my brother is just like my father.

Our voices, our racialised experiences, and our ability to articulate those experiences in ways that only we can, are essential to the goals of the feminist movement. We are not separate voices that whisper in the background. We are, and should be, front and centre.

What we need is an equality framework that works for all women. That takes into account intersectionalities of gender, race, ethnicity, religion and disability. That recognises the double, sometimes triple, disadvantage of being not just female but black and female, ethnic and female, disabled and female. A minority within a minority.

Lastly, but certainly not least, we need to get more women of colour in to positions of power.

As is the core mission of Emily's List, we know that to create real change for marginalised groups in society they need a seat at the table.

All of us know that it is never good enough to say “no women put up their hand” when only the awkward white blokes with ill-fitting polyester suits apply for positions.

You know the type.

Well, and I hope you hear me when I say this; it is never good enough to say “no women of colour put up their hand” either.

We need a recalibration in our thinking and our behaviour. We need to go out, find capable and intelligent women of colour, and encourage them to apply themselves in all areas of our movement.

There was a time when I rejected the term feminist. I refused to be called a feminist because I didn't feel there was a place for me in the movement.

But tonight, I stand as a proud feminist.

And as feminists, we know that identifying the problem is not enough. When you leave here tonight, I want you to go home and think about what you can do to bring the movement to all women.

This – right now – is our moment to come together. And when women and the wider progressive movement are staring down the barrel of a populist gun, it's more important than ever.

History is truly watching us, and we will be judged tomorrow for what we do today.

So let's find more women. Let's build a movement bigger than any of us have ever seen. Let's disrupt. Let's destroy the joint. And when we celebrate wins, let's make sure all of us have something to celebrate.

Only by doing so can we truly adhere to the core principle of feminism. Not as a term that applies to a biological sex category, but to a social grouping with which all women can identify.

A feminism that recognises unity and stands for diversity. Thank you.

