



Griffith Journal
of Law & Human Dignity
**GENDER, CULTURE
& NARRATIVE**

GRIFFITH JOURNAL OF LAW & HUMAN DIGNITY

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GENDER, CULTURE, AND NARRATIVE:

EDITORIAL

I INTRODUCTION

Stories and narratives have long been used to influence, transform, and drive social change. When framed in a certain light, stories can break the dignity of people — render them helpless, stigmatised, and without a voice. By the same token, stories can create strong human connections with others, and they can repair the broken dignity of people. The words of poets like Audre Lorde and writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have spearheaded movements, torn down constructed narratives, and replaced them with stories of agency, resistance, and memory of events almost lost and erased. They make individual stories and experiences *visible* to others, when before they were *invisible*.

Our *Journal* seeks to give voice to the silenced, disenfranchised, and marginalised, and our narrative policy aims to empower voices excluded by traditional legal scholarship. While we have published narratives before, I sought to emphasise the value of life story-oriented narratives for this Special Issue. Almost two years ago, I remember sitting in an empty classroom in Beijing, China, long after the class had ended, trying to collect my thoughts and ideas for a draft Mission Statement that was well overdue. How should I put all my feelings into words?

From a very young age I have been exposed to different manifestations of the power and strength of women, from family members, friends, teachers, mentors. These women were powerful in their own right with a place in society, but what this power and place meant differed from culture to culture. I have spent a difficult part of my life negotiating between a culture that values brashness, outspokenness, and assertiveness, and another that encourages you to direct thoughts inward, listen, consider, and act pragmatically. How can I make people listen? Raise your voice; raise your hand; write words on a page? In our very different approaches, I see a common thread: that we can still fight to make others listen, to create change, and attempt to shape institutions rather than have them passively shape us. When I listen to the stories of people who have overcome adversity, or are survivors of tragic events, I am always reminded of this.

With this in mind, in that empty classroom, I drafted an earlier version of the following mission statement:

We define a culture by the values, customs, and norms shared among social groups. Gender roles are a pervasive feature across various cultures. When laws reinforce these norms, they shape the types of violence, struggles, or triumphs that characterise our narratives. In this Special Issue, we intend to create a space for personal narratives alongside academic scholarship. By including both types of discourse, we seek to broaden critical scholarship with the candid voice and lived experience. We know that issues of gender and culture are not widely understood, and we know they attract certain stereotypes and assumptions. We want to show how culture can silence but how culture can also liberate.

In creating this space for novel forms of legal narratives, and in highlighting notions of agency and resistance, we wanted to encourage conversations that address taboo topics, question traditional perspectives on gender and culture, and explore law's role in constructing and reproducing gender and cultural norms. In adopting this theme, the Special Issue takes inspiration from intersectional and postcolonial feminist approaches.¹ Through these lenses, I often view stories and articles as either empowering or diminishing the agency of the person or groups involved — placing value on how people are *represented* in discourse, and how these people respond to and resist compounding forms of oppressions. We are informed by a “feminist curiosity” that asks: Where are the women? Where are the people of colour? What perspectives can certain groups share?² Despite popular opinion, when we talk about *gender* we are not focusing solely on the experiences of women. The perspectives of women are important because the groups who face compounding forms of oppression and disadvantage are often women, so they are naturally the perspectives that we should seek out. But almost all feminists, myself included, define gender as a set of socially and culturally constructed variables that consist of “positive” masculine stereotypes — such as power, rationality, and strength — and “negative” feminine stereotypes — such as weak,

¹ My inspirations for the Special Issue include the works of Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and other intersectional feminists like Aph Ko.

² Enloe's “feminist curiosity”: Cynthia Enloe, ‘The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire’ (2004, California, University of California Press).

powerless, emotional, and private.³ Throughout the Special Issue, you will see how these stereotypes interact with and influence cultural norms; how they are performed, but also resisted and overcome.

II STORIES & ESSAYS

The Special Issue opens with Dr Katherine Fallah's powerful, emotive, and intimate narrative '*Re Georgio*'. Fallah offers a window into Georgio's life, touching on the complex realities that affect the transgender community, such as internalised transphobia, pressures to "act" and "perform" gender stereotypes, and facing daily micro-aggressions when engaging with our cisnormative institutions. As she notes, Fallah does not attempt to speak *for* Georgio, but has worked closely with him to deliver his story, and does so with a poetic turn of phrase that breathes life and imagery into his narrative.

This is followed with an article written by Pidgeon Pagonis, an intersex person and activist. Pagonis' narrative highlights the trauma and violence the author has experienced at the hands of doctors, grappling with the medical profession's restricted understanding of sex and gender. With a powerful call to action, Pidgeon underlines that being intersex is *not* a medical condition. Being intersex is not what is wrong here — what is wrong has been the response of society.

An article written by Dr Carmen Lawrence, Australia's first female Premier, follows. In a unique approach, Dr Lawrence's article merges a personal account with her understanding of psychology to show the different, and often innocuously framed, ways that sexism permeates our societies — whether that be in "othering" women as "exceptional", or how our institutions and social structures continue to enable gender-based discrimination through male-centric definitions of "merit" and "good leadership".

Drawing on her own experience as an Asian American, Rachel Kuo discusses how micro-aggressions (or "everyday" sexism and racism) serve to normalise particular racial, gendered, and cultural tropes that are grounded in an historical context. By focusing on US immigration and naturalisation history, Kuo illustrates how the construction of Asian

³ See, eg, J Ann Tickner, 'You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists' (1997) 41(4) *International Studies Quarterly* 611, 614.

peoples as “yellow peril” has anchored certain definitions of morality, sexuality, and xenophobia that continue to frame “Asian-ness” in Western societies.

Tuanh Nguyen and Reynah Tang’s article, which combines Nguyen’s narrative experience with an academic discussion of cultural diversity, is a timely reminder to be hyper-aware of how micro-aggressions and cultural stereotypes can fuel unconscious bias towards Asian Australians and other racial/ethnic groups. In Nguyen’s story, she reflects on experiences that have demoralised and discouraged many talented and capable women from progressing through the legal profession’s senior ranks, and Tang answers how we can work towards better solutions.

Dr Lauren Rosewarne then follows with a witty and pithy article that questions why the age-old maxim of “write what you know” has the heaviest burden on women when it comes to art. Drawing on Beyonce’s *Lemonade*, Rosewarne critiques and explores the assumption that the album is a diary, of confession, and how the craft, talent, and creativity of artists like Beyonce are downplayed when gossip and triviality threaten to overpower the art.

Elise Stephenson, Kaye Broadbent, and Glenda Strachan’s article delves into research comparing Equal Employment Opportunity (‘EEO’) policies among 10 female university leaders in Australia and Hong Kong. In using excerpts of interviews with female leaders, the case study highlights how narrow EEO policies that fail to address organisational culture in an environment where gendered and cultural norms intersect are not effectively addressing the ‘invisible barriers’ of unconscious bias, and more-developed EEO policies that target covert forms of discrimination (in addition to overt) promote better outcomes.

In a personal narrative, Juntao Lyu recalls his childhood and adolescence as one of China’s “left-behind” children. Through the author’s lenses, we can see how China has not only left the author “behind” but in other respects too, such as infrastructure, quality of education, and the *value* of education in relation to rural women and girls. In highlighting that these children deserve better solutions, Lyu prompts us to consider who are the “left-behind” in our own societies.

Judith Herrmann’s article then follows, analysing her experience navigating particular ethical and safety issues conducting research with Rwandan survivors of sexual violence.

In outlining the challenges she faced, she provides a personal account of context-specific experiences and lessons learned to help researchers prepare for their work with vulnerable groups.

Finally, Hazal Gacka's manuscript adopts a feminist perspective and discusses the experiences of female athletes in sport, including unequal salaries across genders, sexist comments, the sexualisation of female athletes, and more. She refutes the idea that sport becomes a place where "talent" and "hard work" prevails — instead highlighting the nuanced, multiple barriers standing between women and gender parity in sport.

III LOOKING FORWARD

There are many lessons I have learned from putting together this Special Issue, and I am really proud of the breadth and scope we have achieved. One particular lesson is joined by a common thread throughout the articles: that instead of moulding ourselves to the image that fits, we need to continue fighting until our art-forms, workplaces, institutions, hospitals, and schools are foregoing traditional merit-based structures, campaigning against cisnormative violence, becoming conscious of those micro-aggressions that leave you off balance.

By the same token, we should recognise that these experiences are not universal, and are not produced in a vacuum. We acknowledge that to be "candid" and "authentic" are in themselves constructions, and we should always contextualise struggles and critiques in historical, geographical, and cultural locations — rather than positing them as universal insights. These authors speak from positions that are worlds apart, and may even contradict one another, but coherency is not our goal. These stories are powerful; they catch and hold you; and they draw on human emotion and connection.

By engaging with these stories, we can refine our own thinking, and learn, grow, and change. Maybe you will become more inclusive in your everyday interactions and language, and perhaps see the world from an alternate perspective. At the end of the day, these stories speak for themselves — I hope that you will listen.

Michelle Gunawan
Editor-in-Chief