

abortion was not the only issue on the agenda. We had made this bill a vehicle for a broader campaign. This was the first time that the bill and the campaign followed were simultaneously the subject of a political

### 3

## FEMINIST AS FUCK

25 September 2019. It's my first visit back to New South Wales parliament since taking up my role in the Australian Senate. Sitting in the public gallery of the lower house, I look down at the debate below. This is the moment we have been waiting for. The Speaker announces, 'The ayes have it.' My heart bursts with emotion, like a dam wall breaking. After 70 hours of debate, politicians have finally voted to decriminalise abortion in New South Wales. It is done.

I had imagined this moment would be bittersweet for me. Instead, I was walking on air. It had been more than a thousand days since I introduced the first bill to decriminalise abortion in the parliament's history. Although my bill was voted down, I believe it paved the way for the victory I had just witnessed. By having the courage to break the long



quest for women's rights I was expecting solidarity, not silencing, from progressive women. How naive was I.

In trying to prevent me from pursuing abortion law reform, there may have been an element of genuine apprehension. But there was more to it than that. The Labor Party in New South Wales has some very strong opponents of abortion rights within its ranks. Most likely, this is why they never made a move to decriminalise abortion, even when they were in government for sixteen years straight. I'm sure pro-choice Labor women were deeply frustrated by being constrained from within their own party, unable to even bring a bill forward for discussion. But this was not a good enough reason to stop me from making an attempt. The parliamentary debate had to start somewhere.

In Victoria and Queensland, these conversations had been jump-started by bills introduced by MPs outside the Labor and Liberal parties. The Greens bill could provide the cover for others to pursue reform in their own parties, I reasoned. But they feared losing control of the narrative more than they feared the consequences of the continued criminalisation of abortion.

The efforts to stop me did make me hesitate. I wouldn't have been human if they didn't. The continuous probing started to play on my mind. It put the fear of 'what if' in my heart. What if things did get worse? What if our attempt was unsuccessful? What if it put us back rather than moving us forward? Perhaps we should wait for a change of government? I started doubting myself.

This was only the start of the personal anguish I would feel. I've sustained many attacks for taking an unapologetically feminist view of abortion: that women and all people needing reproductive health care should have full and unambiguous bodily autonomy. I have been sworn at in the street. Someone yelled 'Dr Death' at me as I was walking into parliament for the debate. People rang my office repeatedly and harassed my staff. People sent horrific, graphic images and abusive messages.

It's never easy to brush off these attacks. It becomes even harder when you are being squeezed both by supporters and by opponents of abortion rights.

These questions, misgivings and accusations would haunt me for the next three years. I would have many sleepless nights, tossing and turning as I wondered if I was doing the right thing. I would question my motives for doing it. Was I doing this for personal recognition? Was my ego getting in the way? After all, others did have more political experience than me.

But every time I came to the same conclusion: the 'it's not the right time' argument is, and always has been, complete bullshit.

Women have always been told to go to the back of the queue. Our priorities have never been a top political priority. They've always been dispensable. We've always been dispensable.

We had already waited a hundred years for the right time. In that time, we'd lived with the fear of dangerous backyard



marriage was legalised in Australia, the New South Wales government's bill to end forced divorces passed parliament.

Every time a toxic dispute between feminism and trans rights flares up, my distress is palpable. I can only imagine how hurt transgender people feel when this happens. In Lahore, I had the privilege of getting to know someone who, despite the social stigma, was a proudly transgender person. Tufail worked for my mother-in-law. They were the life of the neighbourhood.

In Pakistan, unlike Australia, transgender people have always been very visible. Before the British colonised the subcontinent, they were also culturally accepted and respected. An intolerance for gender diverse people and social structures such as a strict gender binary were brought into my part of the world by the British through a penal code that recognised only males and females. The legacy of this cultural and gender supremacy lives on, over there and here.

Tufail passed away some years ago, but their courage to openly be who they were in a society that vilified and stigmatised sexual variance lives on as an example to me. Now, in my role as a parliamentarian, I will take up any opportunity to do something about such discrimination.

It was this belief in intersectional feminism that led me to launch an International Women's Day Breakfast event in 2014 to create a space for anyone who identified as a woman to hear exclusively from women of colour. This series has become quite well known for its honest and radical discussions on gender and race. It also gave us a

platform to advance abortion rights with the inclusivity they demanded.

Feminists who resist inclusivity or intersectionality do our movement a disservice. The issues that some feminists choose to prioritise (or not prioritise) illustrates their privilege. The lack of awareness of the failings of the feminist movement to bring everyone along was evident at a forum on feminism in the New South Wales Parliament. On the panel was a very prominent white feminist. In responding to an audience question about the lack of diversity in the feminism movement, she asserted that the feminist movement had always been inclusive of all women, and that anyone suggesting otherwise was just playing into the hands of men to divide the movement.

My skin bristled. As often happens, I couldn't help myself. I had to say something. I pointed out that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have talked extensively about how they have felt isolated from the middle-class pursuits of second-wave feminism, and the movement should reflect on the different needs of different women. As I left the forum, I was pulled aside and told in no uncertain terms that I was being divisive by bringing up the issue of intersectionality.

What I was pointing out was that the spotlight on the 'gender gap' often focuses on inequality between men and women. This conceals the reality of the layered oppression diverse groups of women and individuals face—for instance, Aboriginal women, trans women, disabled women, migrant women, women of colour.



overt and covert rebellion against the dominant system made it easier for me to mark out my own path in life. Most of my female cousins are better educated than the male ones. Many are career women. They have worked as teachers, academics, chartered accountants, in advertising and in the civil service. Some have been working mothers. By and large, they all chose their own destiny. One of the cousins I looked up to most went on to become the first female deputy commissioner in Pakistan. It was their feminism that made me who I am.

In discussions on feminism, the role of men often comes under scrutiny. Should they be part of our feminist struggle? Can they be trusted to help break down the very system that advantages them? Can they truly be feminist?

Men are free to be feminists. But they have to spare us the performative and tokenistic feminism that is characterised by the wearing of a white ribbon or the right T-shirt, by putting a popular frame on a profile picture or by starting hashtags. Feminism is about us, not them. If men want to be true allies, they must be willing to put down the tools of patriarchy: power, dominance, control, coercion. They must listen, learn and—crucially—shut up. That means they need to be okay with staying behind the scenes and leaving the space wide open for women to take centre stage. It means not hijacking conversations on women's issues. It means calling yourself a feminist not only in spaces where it draws praise, but in the male-dominated spaces where it has a more challenging effect: the locker rooms, Cabinet

meetings and boardrooms from which women are largely excluded.

During our campaign for reproductive autonomy, there were many men who stepped up but whose faces and names were never seen or read. They wrote letters, started petitions, helped tape up posters and took the photos, rather than squeezing themselves into the frame. They walked the walk.

One of these men was my husband.

Growing up, Omar was surrounded by strong, independent women like his mother and his aunts. One of his role models, his paternal grandfather, had been a strong ally of women. In the 1940s he established a school for girls in Lucknow, now a part of India. In the last years of the British Raj, he was becoming very concerned about the lack of educational opportunities for Muslim girls. He had been a highly respected Additional Chief Engineer of the Central Public Works Department, but was now paralysed and bedridden. Not deterred by his disability, he enlisted community support to organise the funding for a fee-free primary school. To make sure this school was not viewed as a charity project by the parents of prospective students, his youngest daughter moved to this new public school. His eldest daughter, Hameeda Bano, took on the role of headmistress.

The next challenge was to ensure that these students continued on to high school. One of the best ways to do this was to normalise young Muslim women's attendance at high school. The problem was that, at that time, many Muslim



just horrific,' she said. 'I had death threats, the AFP were tracking down mail that was sent to me . . . If you are an Aboriginal person and you challenge the status quo, you are going to be attacked.'<sup>4</sup>

Her attempts to call out racism were met with even more racism. Nova's story is similar to those of other women of colour who are politicians in Western countries.

During his time as president of the United States, Donald Trump time and again targeted the four progressive Democratic congresswomen of colour known as 'The Squad'. He told them to go back to the 'broken and crime-infested places from which they came'.<sup>5</sup> Mocking Ilhan Omar, the first Somali-American elected to Congress, he said: 'She's telling us how to run our country. How did you do where you came from?'<sup>6</sup>

I see a lot of my own experiences in the attacks on these women. Since I joined the upper house of the New South Wales Parliament in 2013, the avalanche of messages sent my way echo these comments. The steady rise in gender and race hatred reached a crescendo after I delivered my inaugural speech as the first female Muslim senator in Australia five years later. I was not backwards in coming forward.

'The reality is that my presence in the Senate is an affront to some,' I said. 'They are offended that people of colour, and Muslims, have the audacity to not only exist but to open our mouths and join the public debate. Some politicians call us cockroaches. Some say we are a disease against

which Australia needs vaccination. Some, if they had their way, would ban us from making Australia our home. So it is with great pride that I stand here before you, unapologetically—a Brown, Muslim, migrant, feminist woman, and a Greens senator. I say "unapologetically", because if there is one thing people with stories like mine are asked to do constantly, it is to apologise for our presence, because we are not quiet enough, not respectful enough, not thankful enough, not Australian enough.'

I was showered with accolades for my truth-telling. The speech received 2.5 million views and was covered by *Al Jazeera*, the *Guardian* and newspapers around the world. It even made a cameo appearance in the ABC series *Total Control*, with Deborah Mailman's character studying it while pondering her own first speech in the Senate. Simultaneously, a horrible feeding frenzy of hate was unleashed on social media. Comments like 'Put your burka on—and shut the fuck up!', 'Deport the whining bitch' and 'Revoke citizenship and Deport' were some of the vile reactions on my Facebook page. Others said: 'Can someone shoot this bitch?', 'Going to be great bashing her', 'She needs to be stoned to death', and 'Put a bomb under her'.

It was later revealed by a *Guardian* investigation that I, along with the two first Muslim congresswomen in the United States, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, was a target of a covert international plot to control some of Facebook's largest far-right pages to harvest Islamophobic hate for profit.<sup>7</sup> At the time of my first speech in the Senate,



normalising their ideas. The problem is that even if most people turn away from watching it, at least some will be enticed to take the next step towards extremism. And that is how these movements cross from the periphery to the mainstream. This isn't a game. This isn't a theoretical study. For us, this is a fight for our lives.

\*\*\*

The growth of the far right has been accompanied by a rise in Islamophobia, with girls and women the most likely targets. Charles Sturt University's 2019 'Islamophobia in Australia' report found that harassment of Muslims in public spaces guarded by security officers had jumped by 30 per cent since the last report, and racist attacks requiring hospitalisation had doubled.<sup>14</sup>

In my years of public life, I have been a witness to and a target of hate's exponential growth in Australia. The year after I became the first Muslim woman politician in Australia, we reached a new and disgraceful low when the federal parliament's presiding officers enacted new rules.<sup>15</sup> Muslim women wearing a burqa or niqab would be forced to sit in glass enclosures segregated from the public gallery if they visit the 'people's house' in Canberra. While that proposal didn't get very far in the end, the notion of policing Muslim women is still very much alive, whether it's putting us in boxes, shutting us up or curbing our thoughts.

Not a day goes by when I don't receive a hateful, abusive message on Twitter or Facebook. Others make phone calls;

still others send emails. Some even write letters. A man once sent me an extremely sexually explicit and abusive letter with a signature from his church. When I brought this to the church's attention, he sent me an apology explaining that he was upset because Turkey had invaded Greece. As I saw it, he wasn't sorry for writing the letter; he was sorry he got caught. What does Turkey invading Greece some 400 years ago have to do with me? Well, I am a Muslim, and Turkey is a Muslim state. So obviously I must be responsible for the actions of all Muslims throughout time. How bloody ridiculous!

If you are a Muslim migrant, where you come from will haunt you forever. Public demands to 'get out of my country' and 'go back where you came from' are familiar to all of us. If you are a woman, it gets worse. One contributor to the ever-growing pile of hate mail told me that 'Muslims are complete scum', before clarifying that 'Muslim women are even worse than the men'.

The more you speak up about these slurs, the more you get attacked. Accompanying the now predictable hatred are the haters' assumptions about why I speak out. It's to attract more loathing, they say, so that I can play the victim. Someone called my office to tell my staff I was a drama queen. Others accuse me of playing identity politics, using my gender, race and religion as weapons—as if these are not the constant subject of the abuse I receive. I admit, I don't shy away from saying things that others find controversial. But surely we can provoke conversations on controversial issues without descending into racism or sexism.



they heard me say it. Their world must be small and meaningless if a headline in the *Daily Mail* is a win for them.

It wasn't the first time the *Daily Mail* tried to pin me down with a dog-whistle headline. When they asked my views on halal slaughter, they were told I supported mandatory stunning of animals—something that was happening already in almost all halal slaughterhouses in Australia anyway. They decided to run some incredibly deceptive headlines, presumably in an attempt to drive a wedge between me and the Muslim community. They didn't, of course, mention in the article that I'm a vegetarian, and personally I don't think any animal should be slaughtered.

Some don't want me in Australia because I'm a Muslim. For them, my way of life is incompatible with modern Australia. Others tell me to stick to my religion and not to meddle in 'our way of life'. They don't want me to campaign for decriminalising abortion or legalising drugs. Either way, I'm accused of being divisive.

Honestly, I don't think I'll ever be Australian enough for some. Not even, as I wrote in August 2018, if I stood on Bondi Beach serving sausage sangers in an Akubra, draped in an Australian flag with a Southern Cross tattoo on my arm.<sup>20</sup>

I just don't fit the mould they have made for me. I am Muslim but I don't wear hijab. I'm from Pakistan yet I am progressive, and assertive. I wear shalwar kameez and I wear a hardhat too. I don't drink but I can swear like a drunk. These oddities, it seems, make me a sinister paradox.

That's when the shit really hits the fan. I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.

\*\*\*

When you disrupt the false, reductive portrayal of Muslim women, everyone is confused—the left, the right and those in between. I mean, who has ever heard of a progressive migrant Muslim woman of colour who speaks her mind? When strong perceptions clash with a contrary reality, the nuances and complexities are deliberately obliterated, or wilfully ignored.

When I was first elected to parliament, a prominent male Muslim leader expressed his wariness. He stated that being part of the Greens 'will be something that is likely to test her . . . we will be watching to see whether she will allow her beliefs as a Muslim to succumb to the party policy'.<sup>21</sup> He was, of course, referring to the Greens' position on LGBTQI+ equality.

It wasn't only his proposition that bothered me: his assumption that I would 'succumb' to party policy was really offensive. He expected I would be passive, as if I were a bystander without agency. It was actually the opposite. I joined the Greens *because* of social justice policies like marriage equality that reflect my values of compassion and dignity. Since then I've worked with members to make our policies more progressive: I want uni and TAFE to be fee-free; I want to legalise cannabis; I want to end commercial horse racing.



This man was not alone in his view. My continued support for marriage equality, which included co-sponsoring the cross-party marriage equality bill in the New South Wales Parliament in 2013, brought upon me the ire of friends and family back in Pakistan. I was told that 'Western' thinking had got to me. I'd been brainwashed. I'd lost my way and I would burn in the fires of hell for eternity. Some have disowned me. I've lost connection with some others.

But in the face of hostility, I did not shy away from public support for marriage equality. I never hid my views. During the height of the marriage equality debate in Australia in 2017 I wrote an opinion piece for *The Guardian*, clearly articulating why as a Muslim I was publicly and proudly voting 'YES', and so was my family.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps most surprising is the flak I've copped from some within the Greens for being a Muslim. Honestly, it was the most unexpected form of insult, and really hurts. I've since talked to other women of colour and understand that the experience is not unique to me. Progressives have blind spots just like anyone else, from the 'brogressives' to the POEBIs (Progressive On Everything But Israel). Some harbour a deep mistrust of religion that spills over into racism without much prodding.

Just days after I moved into my Senate office in Sydney, my staff were called incessantly over a period of days by a Greens member who complained about some Muslims in his neighbourhood who had cleared their land unlawfully. He wanted me to personally apologise for the damage these

people had caused to the environment. He claimed that I, as a Muslim, bore responsibility for their deeds. When we refused, he lodged a complaint with my state party.

Now, you would expect that such an unreasonable demand would be nipped in the bud. Not so. I was asked not only to respond to the complainant, but to meet him face to face to assure him that my religion had nothing to do with my decision. That I was always secular in my decision-making. He was happy to come meet me at my office, I was told. The fuck he was. Over my dead body would I give such assurances to such bigotry. My track record speaks for itself. I'm happy to be judged for my actions, not the actions of others.

I have become quite used to demands for an apology or condemnation for every act of terrorism by ISIS, as if I were somehow responsible for their atrocities, and then being attacked for not doing so. Is every Australian Catholic MP asked to condemn and apologise for every act of child abuse committed by Catholic clergy? Of course not. They shouldn't be. And I shouldn't be either. It is a no-win situation for me, though. If I were to apologise, it would create an expectation that I should do so for every crime committed by someone who happened to be Muslim. If I don't, I will be cast as a terrorist sympathiser.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, it wasn't the demand for a personal apology that shook me to the core, it was that some in my own party couldn't see his blatant Islamophobia. It shouldn't have surprised me. Over the years, I have experienced the consequences of this blind spot which some progressives have



about religion and people of faith. I know of members who did not vote for me in a preselection contest because of that 'Muslim' thing, referring to the homophobic religious views associated with mainstream Islam, even though they knew well my strong advocacy for marriage equality and LGBTIQ+ rights.

In my early days as an MP, when the hate was pouring in, some Greens colleagues, while sympathetic, told me to get used to it. They said they too had been vilified for our radical policy stances. They may have been trying to reassure me, but comparing racism with abuse that white people receive for a policy position was cold comfort. At best, their thoughtlessness ignored my experiences of racism; at worst, it minimised them.

In 1963, Martin Luther King drew attention to the way the white progressive establishment talked about standing in allyship with the African American struggle, but often served as a handbrake on the movement, its tactics and strategies. In his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', he wrote about being 'gravely disappointed with the white moderate'.<sup>24</sup> In the letter he noted that the 'shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.'

I can relate to this. White progressiveness that refuses to recognise its own complicity in the system we are trying to overturn is damaging to an anti-racist movement. The rolling of eyes when I bring up racism (as if to say, 'Here she goes

again'), the calls to 'take the high road' and just ignore the hate (as if racism isn't corrosive, but something that should roll off our backs), and most importantly, the inevitable reluctance to cede space to others are all signs of the white reluctance to give up the privilege they've had for centuries.

Often, white progressives will talk the talk, but when they have to reflect upon their own role, or let people of colour talk for themselves rather than talk for them, they suddenly forget how to walk the walk. Or, even worse, when their power is threatened, they try to take you down or reduce you to nothing more than an empty puppet, doing the dance of someone who is pulling your strings. They also reduce you to the stereotype of a Muslim woman without the agency to make her own choices. They always know better.

When I decided to run for the Senate, I was gravely hurt by the character assassination that came from people who were not pleased by my decision. I had considered them allies, even confidants, and held them up as shining examples of true progressives. Almost overnight there was a concerted effort to transform me from a solid left-wing MP to a lackey of those in the party viewed as less progressive. I was cast as a gullible and presumably brainless Brown woman who didn't understand what she was doing. I was ignored at rallies by people who just weeks before would have hugged me and thanked me for my work. Did it not occur to them that I had the right, in a democratic preselection, to put my name forward, as did any other member of the NSW Greens?



Governments can't wipe their hands clean either. Excluding these workers on temporary visas from welfare support during the COVID-19 pandemic forced more of them to continue working during a highly precarious time. If self-appointed white saviours really want to show gratitude, they could fight for the rights of these workers. We get platitudes, but too often issues of systemic racism and chronic labour exploitation are swept under the carpet.

If we bring our parents here, that becomes an economic drain on the country. We become a liability at times of crisis and are left to fend for ourselves. Politicians court us as voting blocs, but we disappear in parliaments. They've befriended us by enthusiastically sharing our food and culture, but we are really just photo opportunities during Diwali and Eid. They've taken what we offer willingly, but not given back.

If Australia is to truly become the 'greatest multicultural country', then we must recognise the intrinsic value of cultural preservation as an essential part of the fabric of the nation. We must understand that maintaining and enhancing individuals' connections to their culture and language enriches us all. And at the core of this change must be recognition and respect for the oldest culture in the world.

A multicultural country is anti-racist and feminist: racism and the patriarchy are systems designed to accumulate power and privilege. We can't just wish them away: their dismantling has to be deliberate.

I speak out on racism and sexism because it is the first step in the process of tearing down structures of white

power that entrench inequalities. I don't do it to claim victimhood. I don't want sympathy. It doesn't make me feel good. I don't want others to feel bad. It is simply an expression of truth. It is voicing the experiences of others like me who don't have the public platform I have. It helps others speak out. I know what it's like not to have a voice. I will never be silenced again.

\*\*\*

Receiving and exposing hate is exhausting. The vicious insults and threats grind me down. Over the years, I've tried many different ways to deal with the vitriol, from ignoring it to reporting it and highlighting some of the worst examples, sometimes with a touch of humour.

A year into my political journey, the abuse was becoming unbearable. Moderating the Facebook comments alone was becoming a full-time job for my staff. Abusive phone calls were taking a toll on our health. Something had to be done. Most people I confided in were completely unaware of the abuse, or were in total disbelief. Some, usually those who will never feel the sting of structural oppression, dismissed these online manifestations of racism as inevitable and ineffective. Well, they may have been inevitable, but they were damaging us. Ignoring them wasn't going to stop that. Nor would it stop them.

At a strategic planning day, my team and I decided that we shouldn't cop all this silently. We agreed that 'don't feed the trolls' may be heartfelt advice from allies, but for us



racism also targets migrants. This has emerged both from the conservatives and within the progressive environmental movement itself. We migrants are blamed for everything from traffic congestion to land clearing. We are told by those on the right of politics that Australia's infrastructure can't cope because there are too many migrants. We've become easy targets to hide the lack of planning by governments. The sustainable population cheerleaders want to keep us out because, apparently, the environment is being destroyed to accommodate us. At a 'Politics in the Pub' event on 'population and environment', the environmentalist on the panel (someone I knew, by the way) was concerned that when migrants came from poor countries where they have a small ecological footprint to rich countries like Australia that have a much larger footprint, they start contributing much more to environmental destruction.

What racist, skewed and perverse logic! After the discussion, that panellist approached Omar and me to assure us that we were not the migrants he was referring to. We were fine. We were the 'good', environmentally aware migrants. The hide!

The obsession with Brown and Black women's fertility is another thinly veiled racist attempt by environmentalists to blame others for the ecological crisis we are in. This is dangerous, and plays straight into far-right conspiracy theories like 'the Great Replacement', which inspired the Christchurch killer who massacred 51 innocent Muslims while they were at prayer.<sup>29</sup>

Is it really us migrants and people of colour who are vandalising the environment? The reality is that the ecological footprint of an Australian is more than nine times greater than someone in Bangladesh, six times more than a Pakistani, and five times greater than someone in the Philippines or Indonesia.<sup>30</sup> In effect, people from these countries are actually subsidising the extravagant lifestyles of those in Western countries as they cannibalise the planet and its resources. Sustainable populationists should look in the mirror before they start looking to shift the blame.

\*\*\*

The devastating climate-induced bushfires of the Australian summer of 2019–20 should have been a wake-up call. Climate scientists made it clear that climate change has made such fires at least 30 per cent more likely<sup>31</sup> (and probably much more). If we remain on this trajectory, around one-third of the world, including communities in Australia, will suffer Sahara Desert-like heat within half a century. Still the Morrison Coalition government refused to awaken from their climate stupor. The bushfires consumed 33 lives, more than 2000 homes and many more livelihoods. One of the lives lost was that of my dear friend Daintry Gerrand's sister, Julie Fletcher, of Johns River. In Daintry's own words, this is what was lost: